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THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

VOLUME XXV NUMBER 3 NEW SERIES 2004

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Stephen D. Crocco, EDITOR

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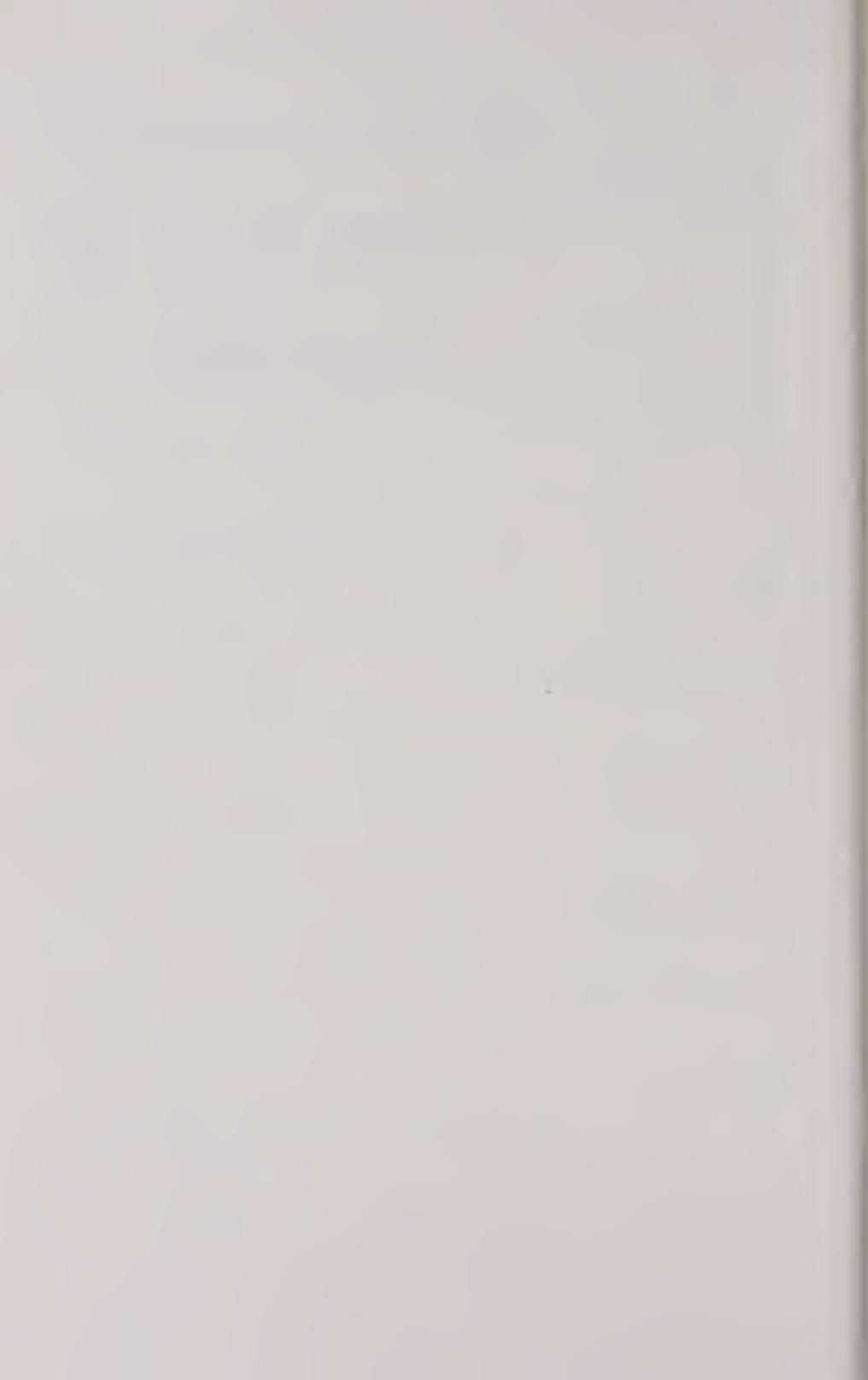
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Editor's Note

THIS ISSUE OF THE *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* contains President Torrance's first American convocation address. His address is also being published in *Theology Today* to ensure that it receives the wide hearing it deserves. "More than Regent's Park?" sparked many discussions when it was delivered on campus and now readers of the *Bulletin* are invited to participate in those discussions.

Larry Stratton completed his term of service as an Editorial Associate with the July issue of the *Bulletin*. I wish him well in his doctoral program at the Seminary.

Every year, the July issue of the *Bulletin* provides a list of Seminary faculty publications from the previous year. The lists of publications by Prof. James Kay and Prof. Eunny Lee were inadvertently omitted from the July issue and will be included in full in next year's list. In 2003, Prof. Kay published "Reorientation: Homiletics as Theologically Authorized Rhetoric" in the *Bulletin* and wrote an article on Rudolf Bultmann in *Key Thinkers in Christianity* (New York: Oxford). Prof. Lee was the author of "Ecclesiastes" in the *New Interpreter's Study Bible*.

STEPHEN D. CROCCO
EDITOR

More than Regent's Park?

by IAIN R. TORRANCE

Iain R. Torrance is the sixth President of Princeton Theological Seminary. He presented this address in Miller Chapel at the Opening Convocation on September 14, 2004.

I WOULD LIKE MY first act to be an acknowledgment of Tom Gillespie, my distinguished predecessor, who faithfully guided this seminary for so many years. Transitions are never easy, especially after a long tenure. I have never received anything but welcome, kindness, and help from Tom and Barbara. My first act must be to thank them. I am standing in a pulpit which was given by Tom's congregation in California in thankfulness for his ministry. This is a good place in which to stand.

My second act must be to welcome all of you. Some of you have been here for years—in the case of the academic dean, for fifty years. I have been here for only four weeks, and I could not have been made more welcome. Two or three days after my arrival, I received a fruit basket from the students then on campus. I was surprised—and touched and grateful. Thank you.

I guess that a number of those present are as new as I am. This is the first time I have spoken at an American convocation. I am learning, along with many of you. There may be some genre mistakes, but I want to say a little about how I see the world, how the world has changed, and how I believe this seminary may fit in and make a difference. That isn't an unrealistic or grandiose, self-deceiving thought. In the configuration of Christianity across the world today, taking account of how and where it is resourced intellectually, and which institutions produce future leaders, this seminary has a crucial role. That means all of us. We have a wonderful, accessible library of astonishing range and depth. We have a beautiful campus and an historic tradition of rigorous scholarship and have long welcomed an international community. These are factors that can make a difference in the world. But all of these are *material* things. I believe that the founding charisms of this school were in matters of the spirit.

So I want initially to consider a particular perspective on the world and then come back to reconsider my own hopes and beliefs for this seminary. The perspective I want to consider and introduce some of you to is that of Dr. Jonathan Sacks, who has been the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth since 1991. I first came across the work of Jonathan Sacks in 1990, when he gave a set of Reith Lectures on the

BBC entitled *The Persistence of Faith*.¹ The Reith Lectures, along with the Gifford Lectures, which were recently delivered at the University of Edinburgh by Professor Wentzel van Huyssteen, are among the most famous lectures in the world. The Reith Lectures were endowed in the great days of radio, and their purpose was to *broadcast*—literally, to engage with the entire range of people who were questioning all round the world. As an orthodox Jew, Sacks in those lectures spoke about the construction and preservation of religious identity. He spoke persuasively about tribalism, education, loss, and the transmission of wisdom. He recognized the divisive tendencies becoming more visible in the world, and, using an analogy from language, he urged that we all become bilingual: first, we find identity in learning the language of the tribe, which he called “narrowcasting,” and then we learn citizenship through acquiring the skills of public discourse, which he called “broadcasting.” Sacks was prophetic. His concern was both to nurture identity and encourage people to reach out. He was convinced by the benefits of a multicultural society. From a Jewish perspective, he anticipated aspects of what Stanley Hauerwas wrestled with in *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1983) and *Resident Aliens* (1989). Those early lectures were followed in 1997 by a more developed version entitled *The Politics of Hope*. In this, Sacks took account of loss of confidence, language and violence, public space, the liberal revolution, the birth of the individual, surviving catastrophe, and the politics of responsibility. All of this, astonishingly, was four years before the world changed on 9/11. In 2002, reflecting on his earlier work, he published *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, which provoked such controversy that a revised edition was quickly issued.

One reason for my persisting interest in Jonathan Sacks is that he did not rapidly have to invent a new perspective in September 2001. For him, the widespread changes were already there and had long been identified. But now everyone had to pay attention. These are changes that are both global and local; changes in the way we understand ourselves and others, changes that affect our hopes, our self-giving, our spending, our style, our education. That's why I want to give a little time to Jonathan Sacks's perspective.

First, Sacks appropriates and makes use of Alasdair MacIntyre's perception in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981) that we are now living amidst the fragments of the moralities of the past. We have lost confidence in grand metanarratives. All of developed Western society is now like Europe at the beginning of the seventeenth century, a world so damaged and divided that

¹ *The Persistence of Faith: Religion, Morality and Society in a Secular Age* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1991).

religion could no longer provide a bond of unity. As Sacks noted, this led directly to the secularization of Europe, first in science, then in the arts, then in politics. This was the time, for example, when just-war theory was moved from the realm of theology into civil law. Sacks, in contrast, maintains belief in the humanizing power of faith for today, but we will pick that up in a few minutes.

Living in the midst of fragments is a shift in mindset with which the Western democracies are ill-equipped to deal. By and large, they have retreated from substantive ethical perspectives and have become procedural and managerial. Interestingly, the forthcoming U.S. election looks as if it may be different. By and large, Western governments are fearful, with good reason, of intervention. Sovereignty, located in different places, for example the British disinclination to join the euro, is treated as if it were inviolable. That is coupled with a commitment to relativism. Sacks, in his book *The Politics of Hope*, tells of James Wilson lecturing to students at Harvard about courage during the Holocaust years. Wilson was dismayed to find that there was no general agreement that those guilty of the Holocaust itself were guilty of a moral horror. "It all depends on your perspective," one student said.²

Much of the responsibility for framing the contemporary situation with all its ills is attributed to globalization, which has contributed more changes more quickly than we can handle. Simultaneously, globalization has eroded and debased Western culture and fostered contempt for it in the wider world. We are distanced both from ourselves and from others. We are caught in the slip-stream of a revolution that dwarfs the long-term effects of the invention of the printing press. Sacks reminds us that, when he took office in 1993, Bill Clinton noted that there were some fifty registered websites. When he left office in 2000, there were upwards of 350 million.³ In the days before Google, McLuhan is supposed to have likened searching the Internet to drinking from Niagara with a spoon. Sacks adds to this the decadence and emptiness of our culture, especially when exported and transmitted by television. The emphasis on consumption is trivializing to those with ancient spiritual heritages, and deeply exclusionary to those who are left out in the race to riches.

Sacks is surprised by the resurgence of religion as such a major factor in today's world and is dismayed by the tone of voice with which it has entered the fray. This may be expected from a gentle academic, but when religion carries so much freight—not all of it religious, by any means—as the creator

² Jonathan Sacks, *The Politics of Hope* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), 35.

³ *Ibid.*, 26.

of identity and cohesion, its growth is surely not unlikely at a time of such uncertainty.

Sacks's remedies for the modern malaise are interesting and long-considered. First, and this is the major contribution of his recent book, *The Dignity of Difference*, he argues for a different way of understanding that which we hold in common and that which we acknowledge as being different. More technically, and, I think, building on a phrase from Arnold Toynbee, he calls for the exorcism of Plato's ghost. Essentially, this is the notion, rooted in the philosophy of Plato, that there is a single truth. The idea posits that truth is unreachable but objective, and it follows that if I am right, then you are wrong. Part of Jonathan Sacks's response to this is a plea for space—hence his reference, in *The Politics of Hope*, to Regent's Park in London. Regent's Park is five hundred acres in the heart of London. It is a place where people can meet on equal terms; it is large enough to allow for play and difference. There are coffee shops and restaurants, a zoo, an open-air theater, and a magnificent rose garden. On the basis of the vision of such space, Sacks argues for, and reconstructs, the now-neglected virtues of "reverence, restraint, humility, a sense of limits, the ability to listen and respond to human distress."⁴ These are virtues the market does not provide.

I think this is an important argument. Having thought about it, in certain senses, in the area of truth claims and identity construction, it is an analogy to the much more familiar, but equally mysterious Christian affirmation of forgiveness. To overlook a wrong, or to neglect or discard it, is understandable. To forgive is extraordinary, and is to create a kind of moral space or discontinuity so as to enable a new beginning. I'll come back to this.

Jonathan Sacks has a second major perspective. We can be creative and say utterly new things from within a language, but we can never step outside language and continue to speak. This is the familiar argument that, as human persons, we are all committed, in the sense that no one can bale out of having a perspective. But it is more than that. Sacks is unwilling to take refuge in relativity, trying instead to distinguish between that which is absolute and that which is universal. Appeals to universals are of little help to us in today's world. Positively, they are too "thin" to nurture resolve; negatively, they are a kind of resuscitation of Plato's ghost. Instead, we need to have space to grant dignity to one another's absolutes. As Chief Rabbi of the Commonwealth, Jonathan Sacks reminds us that the God of the Hebrew Bible is not a Platonic being, loving the abstract form of humanity. God is a particularist,

⁴ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2003), 13.

loving each of God's children for who they are. Taking this further, Sacks argues that the supreme religious challenge is to see God's image in one who is *not* in our image.⁵ This is the converse of tribalism. He reminds us that Judaism, in the call of Abraham, was born as a protest against imperialism and its latter-day successors, which attempt to impress a single truth on a plural world. He dramatizes this with a story from *Genesis Rabbah* 8.5, which he told at the funeral of Isaiah Berlin, who was one of the foundational thinkers of twentieth-century liberalism, and the author of the noted essay, "Two Concepts of Liberty."

Sacks quotes: "Rabbi Shimon said: When God was about to create Adam, the ministering angels split into contending groups. Some said, 'Let him be created.' Others said, 'Let him not be created.' That is why it is written, 'Mercy and truth collided, righteousness and peace clashed'" (*Psalm 85:11*).

Mercy said, "Let him be created, because he will do merciful deeds."

Truth said, "Let him not be created, for he will be full of falsehood."

Righteousness said, "Let him be created, for he will do righteous deeds."

Peace said, "Let him not be created, for he will never cease quarrelling."

What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He took truth and threw it to the ground.

The angels said, "Sovereign of the universe, why do you do this to Your own seal, truth? Let truth arise from the ground."

Thus it is written, "Let truth spring up from the earth." (*Psalm 85:12*)

Sacks points us to the bold rabbinic interpretation, "God takes truth and throws it to the ground, meaning: For life to be livable, truth on earth cannot be what it is in heaven."⁶

Let us step back and respond to this. From a Western but other than Christian perspective, we have a complicated account of the disintegration of our contemporary world, its framework and its expectations. It is much more nuanced than my report of it here. We have seen something of Jonathan Sacks's recipes for recovery. These include making space for difference—his analogy of Regent's Park. We have seen his analogy of language: We are all insiders and are committed to speech. We saw his earlier theme of bilinguality, which extended that. We saw his appeal to alternative rabbinic readings of text: "Let truth spring up from the earth."

⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

Now, for the depth of recovery and the re-rooting that we require, I suspect that appeal to a spatial metaphor—Regent's Park—is nothing like enough. In my previous existence as Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Divinity at the University of Aberdeen, recent legislation obliged us to take account of access to buildings and courses by those who were physically or mentally challenged in some way. I became very committed to this and quickly learned that physical barriers were the least of the difficulties we had created. We had to think more than spatially. We needed to ask what our degree programs were for, how they could be delivered, what student learning really is, and how it is assessed.

Again, Jonathan Sacks made a good deal of the disorienting nature of having near and far neighbors. Global trade, detached from a local workforce, makes ever more insecure the livelihood of the poor in parts of the developing world. But the effect of distance is to shield us from full responsibility for our actions. That is true. It is equally true of the effect of long-range combat waged from computer screens in an aircraft carrier. Yet, modern communications do not only distance us. With video conferencing, genocide in Darfur can appear in our living rooms. Our discomfort is that we are both too far and too near. This is linked to questions of when and whether we should ever intervene. That is not only in the area of combat. At the initiative of David Steel, whom I think of as a friend, in 1966 the United Kingdom introduced a much more liberal reform of abortion law. Nearly forty years ago, thresholds were set at what was then understood as viability, and they were subsequently lowered. Yet, when we can measure fetal pain at whatever stage, the argument changes again. In the history of science, this is not unrelated to the argument over vivisection. I don't believe it may be dismissed as merely a failure of imagination. That implies that some people can get it right. I think it is more to do with an overload on an imagination that has no stable footholds or reference points. We get famine fatigue or atrocity fatigue, which has to do with our inability to cope rather than moral dullness. We are reminded of Shakespeare's King Lear, who, once he had blinded himself, thereby dramatically reducing the data, said: "Now I can see."

Analogy from space—distance and proximity—are, I think, not enough, and simply skirt the issue of overload when we have lost our bearings. Sacks's other argument, that Judaism teaches us to see the image of God in one who is not in our image, is much more powerful. I do not think he would disagree, but as a Christian, I would add that we are also called not to be afraid. Where God is, I believe there is an absence of fear, an increase of love, and an increased dissatisfaction with the way things are.

Ultimately (and, until I am convinced otherwise, I may say this too often), I used to believe that Christian ethics was fundamentally to do with geography, with mapmaking and boundaries, and so was related to a spatial imagination. Increasingly now, I believe it has to do with being transformed, and that neither universalism nor prescription is its method. Let me try to illustrate this in a very different way.

The introductory publicity about me said that I like the novels of Sir Walter Scott. I do, so here is an illustration from Walter Scott's novel *The Heart of Midlothian*, which first appeared in 1818. That was when this seminary was only six years old. Scott's novels are closely observant of human nature, but almost all of them are politically inspired. After the two Jacobite rebellions of the eighteenth century and limited, though bitter civil war, Scott was a propagandist for a single, united kingdom. Along with much else, he tells the dramatized version of a true story in which a young woman bore a child, but was then accused of child-murder because the baby had been stolen. The woman was condemned to death under a draconian law that stipulated that, if a woman bore a child in secret, without having told anyone of the pregnancy or having asked for assistance, and could not subsequently produce the child, she was assumed to be guilty of murder. In the actual case and in the novel, the woman's sister was produced as a witness and asked to testify that she had been told of the pregnancy. The high point of the novel, which is a wonderful gothic tale of highwaymen and soul-searching Presbyterians, is that the sister refused to tell a lie under oath. In both novel and history, the woman then walked to London and begged a pardon for her sister from the king, George II. At one level, the novel presents the familiar contest between truth-telling and pragmatism. The presentation of the dilemma was sharply criticized by George Bernard Shaw, the playwright, as an example of the mischief done in the world by "religious and moral ideals."⁷ However, George Bernard Shaw misunderstood it, along with much else. Walter Scott's novel is not about the familiar textbook puzzle. What it is about is whether and how a character who could be so apparently heartless and inflexible could also have such grace as to win a pardon from an unsympathetic king. Essentially, it is a narrative account of how grace and truth, which are so often polarized, may properly be brought together. The alignment of grace and truth is what we see at the end of the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel, and that, itself, I take as a Hebrew hendiadys, *besed w' emet*

⁷ George Bernard Shaw quoted in Walter Scott, *The Heart of Midlothian*, edited by Clair Lamont (Oxford University Press, 1982), xii. The quotation is from "The Quintessence of Ibsenism," *The Works of George Bernard Shaw* (London: Constable, 1930) 19:125.

(grace and truth), which I believe would be close to the heart of Jonathan Sacks. To hold out for that moral space is no more naïve than is the practice of forgiveness to which we all so readily subscribe.

Let me finish. What were the wrongs to which Jonathan Sacks so much referred? Consumption, disregard, greed, relativism, and monolinguality, in the sense of one-way traffic. Effectively, he is referring to a mode of living that is driven purely functionally. Here I come back to us. One of my chief hopes for this school is that it may be a place where truthfulness and grace continue to be linked, and we do not attempt to live purely functionally. I am becoming more aware of the divisions in American Christianity. We have them in Europe, too. All of this address, of course, as you will now realize, has been a deliberate kind of sideways commentary on my desire to see grace and truth cooperate and flourish on this campus. Since I arrived here four weeks ago, I have received many letters. Perhaps the most striking came from the Myanmar Institute of Theology. The principal wrote that Burma, under socialism, was isolated for many years. She was among the first to be allowed to go abroad. She said: "PTS gave me that chance, and since then has accepted and equipped ten faculty members." She listed the Institute's new programs, ending: "These programs and activities are all possible because PTS cared enough about a small seminary in a Third World country." That, I think, is close to the founding charism of this school.

Adaptability and the Good Shepherd

by GEORGE PARSENIOS

John 10:1–11

1 Corinthians 9:19–23

Dr. George Parsenios is an Assistant Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. He delivered this sermon at the opening communion service in Miller Chapel on September 15, 2004.

TO READ THE Gospel of John, scholars have noted, is to stare into a kaleidoscope, in which the same images and phrases are often recast so that, when seen in a new context, they look somehow the same—and yet very different. As he prepares to depart from the world, for example, Jesus tells his disciples, “You know the way, where I am going” (14:4). But then the kaleidoscope shifts, and suddenly, instead of speaking of the way on which he travels, Jesus insists “I AM the way” (14:6). So, too, in the passage before us today, Jesus tells his disciples that he is the Good Shepherd, and that the Shepherd enters the sheepfold through the gate (10:2). But with a turn of the kaleidoscope, although he is still speaking about shepherds and sheep and a gate, Jesus no longer says that he enters through the gate, but instead insists, “I AM the gate” (10:7). That the imagery of the Good Shepherd is so elastic and adaptable is what I would like to reflect on for the next several minutes, not for what this tells us about the Gospel of John, but for what it suggests about the adaptability required of any Good Shepherd.

We could understand pastoral adaptability to mean various things, such as the obvious need to conform to different cultural realities when moving within this country or around the world, in the style of St. Paul who became a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks (1 Cor. 9:19–23). But closer to what I would like to discuss is Paul’s comment a little later, where he adds that he has become “all things to all people” (9:22). All things to all people! An unsympathetic reader might take this to mean that Paul is a flatterer who tries to please all of the people all of the time for personal gain. Such a reading is not only unnecessarily negative, but does not account for the fact that Paul very often tries *not* to please his communities, as when he addresses them with such expressions as, “You foolish Galatians” (3:1).

For a very different way to understand Paul’s claim, John Chrysostom is instructive when he writes that Paul “varies his discourse according to the

need of his disciples.”¹ In his commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians, Chrysostom evaluates Paul’s impassioned and disapproving tone by noting, “Always to speak to one’s disciples with mildness, even when they need severity, is not the character of a teacher, but it would be the character of a corrupter and enemy.” Chrysostom adds that, like a careful physician, Paul knows when to prescribe to his patients soothing balms and medicines, and when to apply the knife in painful, but necessary, surgery. Paul, then, is the adaptable and elastic Good Shepherd.

Ancient moralists often relied on medical imagery similar to Chrysostom’s as they discussed the best way to guide their pupils to greater heights of virtue. We refer to these thinkers as “moral philosophers,” because they were less concerned with the grand metaphysical schemes of previous times, and more interested in how best to meet the vicissitudes of every day, wisely and rightly. (My colleague Gordon Mikoski has reminded me of the claim that, although Seneca, Plutarch, and Musonius Rufus are the heirs of Plato and Aristotle, they are just as certainly the forerunners of Dr. Phil and Oprah.) As these philosophers reflected on how best to meet the variable needs of daily life, a valuable tool was the posture of *parresia*, which we translate either as “boldness” or as “frank speech.” The Platonist Plutarch (AD 45–125) says of frank speech that it is a “most potent medicine in friendship.”² And, as the ancient moralists see it, frank speech is intimately connected to pastoral adaptability.

Extolled as a political asset in Athenian politics, frank speech was the basis of a democratic city that relied on the open and full participation of its citizens in government.³ But speaking openly and boldly soon developed into a useful tool for those who would guide others in the philosophical life. As the philosophers understand it, frank speech does not settle for the status quo; it seeks another level of performance. In some cases it reaches for increased maturity or, if the person in question has ventured onto a dubious path, it calls for a change in direction.⁴ This is frank speech as a pastoral tool. But

¹ St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Galatians*, 1.1. Translations of Chrysostom in this paragraph are taken from volume 13 of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 1.

² Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, 74D. In volume 1 of Plutarch, *Moralia*, 15 vols., trans. Frank C. Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949–1976).

³ David Konstan, “Friendship, Frankness and Flattery,” in *Friendship, Flattery and Frankness of Speech: Studies on Friendship in the New Testament World*, ed. John T. Fitzgerald (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 9.

⁴ J. Paul Sampley, “Paul’s Frank Speech with the Galatians and the Corinthians,” in *Philo of Demus and the New Testament World*, ed. John Fitzgerald, et al. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004), 296.

such a thing requires tremendous adaptability. "A life's problems come in all degrees of difficulty, from the most minor to the seemingly earth-shattering, so . . . [parresia] varies in degree from gentle to harsh."⁵ The task of the deliverer of frank speech is to hit the right note, so that the pastoral response is appropriate to the behavior and disposition of the hearer.

For us, as for the ancients, such adaptability is not easy to achieve because our responses are often habitual and instinctive. Some of us might react aggressively to every crisis even when something milder is required. Or, we might always meet problems with a passive response, even when awful behavior needs to be curbed sharply. Beyond our particular personalities, political or social calculations can also impede frank speech. Stern severity is easy with people we do not like, just as kind compassion comes effortlessly with those we do. But in such cases, frank speech and adaptability have become something less noble and less transformative.

The ancient monastic communities of the Egyptian desert provide helpful models for the proper use of frank speech and adaptability in a Christian setting. From the collected sayings of these ancient communities, I would like to hold up two things as especially instructive. The first is silence. Knowing how to talk begins with knowing how not to talk. The school of silence instructs us in the art of speaking. But here, silence does not simply mean the absence of conversations, which produces a superficial silence. What is needed is silence as a preparation for speech. Abba Poemen notes, "A person may seem to be silent, but if his heart is condemning others he is babbling ceaselessly. But there may be another who talks from morning till night and yet he is truly silent; that is, he utters nothing unprofitable."⁶

Those of you who are students here will find yourselves, quite rightly, talking from morning till night. You are required to speak and are learning how to speak theologically, perhaps for the first time in your lives. This is not the time to tell you not to speak. But you can temper your words, with a view to how they affect others, and how they make you appear. Be careful when you feel compelled to correct someone by saying, whatever the topic, "No, it isn't So and So, but So and So."⁷ In even such small matters, if you pause to reflect on the motives behind your speaking, you will have begun to cultivate the spirit of silence, where you no longer speak in order to assert yourself

⁵ Ibid., 296–97.

⁶ Poemen 27, PG 65:329A. Translation from Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 144.

⁷ For this insight, see Tito Colliander, *The Way of the Ascetics*, trans. Katherine Ferré (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), 26.

upon others, but have begun to discern when it will hurt to speak, and when it might help.

To do this requires freedom from fear: fear that you will not be seen as the smartest person in the room; fear that someone will “get away” with making you look foolish and that you won’t be able to “get them back” in the next conversation.⁸ You may be insulted many times, wittingly or unwittingly, by your fellow students. Be careful how you respond. Because you will also be insulted in your parish some day, and you will do more good in the long run for knowing how to hold your anger than you will for firing back with a good one-liner. And, even more generally, you will be better equipped to see clearly in a murky situation how best to respond if your passions are in check before you speak. The spirit of silence, then, does not imply never speaking. Total silence, too, hinders the work of the shepherd. The spirit of silence means judging when and how best to speak. In this way, paradoxically, silence breeds frank and bold speech.

The second source of frankness is similarly a paradox. We might think that bold speech originates out of a prophet’s righteous indignation or that people who speak frankly are those who do not suffer fools gladly. But in the desert, frank speech was cultivated from the seeds of mercy and from the same impulse that might lead one to clothe the naked and feed the hungry. A young monk, for instance, approaches Abba Lot, because he is unable to come to grips with his shortcomings, and Lot encourages his younger companion by inviting him to pray and confess, and by telling him as they pray, “I will carry half of your sin with you.”⁹ In a similar way, three young brothers went to Abba Achilles and asked him to help them in making fishing nets. He refused the first two, because he was busy, but the third had a very bad reputation among the monks. With him Achilles agreed to work. When the others whom he had refused asked for an explanation, Achilles responded, “[I]f I had not made one for him, he would have said, ‘The old man has heard about my sin, and that is why he does not want to make me anything.’” This would have disheartened the brother, and separated him from Achilles. “But now,” Achilles adds, “I have aroused his soul.”¹⁰ In the desert, fools are suffered gladly. Not only, then, does silence teach one how to speak. Mercy teaches one how to correct.

We can move in a slightly different direction by looking at a fictional character who, without being a desert ascetic, experienced his own form of

⁸ Paraphrasing Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 283.

⁹ Lot 2, PG 65.256B. Translated from *ibid.*, 283.

¹⁰ Achilles 1, PG 65.124BC. Translated from *ibid.*, 284.

deserted isolation: *Robinson Crusoe*. Incidentally, discussing Crusoe in an ascetical context seems especially appropriate to me, because I bought the rather large book in early August when I also began to prepare for the semester and I had to force myself each day religiously to find time to finish it. But I liked the novel so much that I tracked down some interpretive articles discussing the story. One critic was especially provocative as he discussed the novel's emphasis on Crusoe's "displaced self."¹¹ Shipwrecked alone on an uncharted island, Robinson has an excessive concern to preserve his "self" from being consumed by external forces—by the waves that threaten to swallow him in his initial shipwreck, by the earthquake that makes his protective cavern a possible tomb, and by the cannibals who frequent his island and threaten, literally, to devour him. A remarkable thing happens, though, when Crusoe comes upon an isolated footprint on the beach. He is at first terrified by the thought that cannibals are near, but as he reflects on the possible cause of the print, he soon imagines that his own foot made it. And so, in a sense, he sees himself in the footprint of his enemy. This is part of a larger set of themes in the book, in which Robinson slowly comes to see the humanity of the islanders whom he fears, as well as see more clearly his own inadequacy. As he learns to stand outside himself and judge his place in his world, at the same time he sees himself in the footprint of those over whom he assumes superiority.

I mention this by way of corrective, because I have followed Greco-Roman writers in using medical analogies to discuss pastoral adaptability, but this description has its limitations. The image of the all-powerful "gaze" of the physician who identifies and clarifies other people's infirmities might suggest that we can assume the physician's health. If we're honest with ourselves, we know that this is a fiction and that no one leaves clean footprints. Indeed, a necessary step in acquiring the art of frank speech is the ability to allow oneself to be the recipient of it. And this means surrounding oneself with friends and advisors of a certain kind. Recall in an earlier quotation where Plutarch claimed that frank speech "is a most potent medicine in friendship." The word friendship here is not casual. Ancient discussions of friendship, like that in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, recognized several types of friendship. People might call their friends those whose company they enjoy, or perhaps those whose association is useful for advancement. But at the highest level are those friends who want nothing but what is just and noble and good for each other. A recent book on Abraham Lincoln demonstrates the obvious fact that

¹¹ See Homer O. Brown, "The Displaced Self in the Novels of Daniel Defoe," *English Literary History* 38 (1971): 562-90.

these gradations of friendship continue to define relationships in the modern world.¹² The biographer uses Aristotle's categories of friendship to understand how Lincoln wove a great many people in and out of his life under the name of friend. As president, he relied especially on those who wanted nothing from him, and wanted for him only the best outcome in his decisions. This is the kind of friendship in which frank speech flourishes. Parishes need such frank speech from their pastors, but pastors, like presidents, also need to be spoken to frankly.

I want to offer one more corrective before closing. It would be wrong to suggest that cultivating the demeanor of the Good Shepherd is entirely moral or psychological. Theology matters. Though Jesus is the Way, and he leads us on the way to the Father, the history of Christianity is littered with people who lost the path, and through a false sense of God's identity, developed a false sense of their identity, and behaved accordingly with tragic consequences. One must have a clear sense of who Christ was and is to lead people to him and into him. This requires close study as well as silence. Speaking about God is always bounded by the silence of inexpressible awe. But, some of us might think that we can ignore theological questions altogether, though this is really just to answer them in a less explicit way. Some larger purpose will always guide our activities. Without theological moorings, pastoral adaptability can become a mockery of Paul's warrant to become all things to all people, and the Shepherd can become so elastic as to lose a firm identity. In the Good Shepherd passage, Jesus insists that "I know my own and my own know me" (10:14). All pastoral adaptability and all frank speech are intended to provide a more fertile field for this knowing to increase. Again, theology matters.

To summarize and conclude, then, the Christian Shepherd stands as a bridge between the sheep and the sheepfold, or perhaps it is better to think less in terms of a bridge, and more along the lines of a ladder. In his dream in the book of Genesis, Jacob envisions the angels ascending and descending on a ladder between heaven and earth (Gen. 28:12). The Fourth Gospel opens with Jesus claiming that the angels ascend and descend on him, indicating that he is not only the Way, and the Good Shepherd, but also the ladder of divine ascent (1:51). To guide the sheep to this ladder of divine ascent is the task of the Christian pastor. Doing so will require a lifetime of climbing ourselves and of recognizing that we cannot climb on our own. But this place is where you begin to climb. To the continuing students, good strength in resuming your study and your focus! To the new students, welcome to the Seminary!

¹² David Herbert Donald, *"We are Lincoln Men": Abraham Lincoln and His Friends* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

Stewards of the Mysteries of God

by PATRICK D. MILLER

Deuteronomy 4:42–30
1 Corinthians 4:1–5

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IEXPECT THAT THE mental state of most of you within twenty-four hours of receiving your diploma is pretty much, “Let’s get out of here.” That is understandable. You have been at it hard, in most cases for three or more years. The time may have gone quickly, but it is by definition preparatory for something else, and now it is time to move on to the something else. (I realize that for some of you that may be more study!) Before you do move on, however, we set this time apart to close off your years here as they began, in the worship of God, an enacted, public, visible reminder of who we are and what we are about. We also set it apart as a time for some reflection in the moment of transition, thinking together about where you have been and where you are going.

While there are many ways to go about that, it has seemed to me appropriate to turn our attention to one of those moments of self-reflection on his ministry that Paul occasionally lets seep out of his message to the churches who were his ministerial field. In this case, it is a few verses of chapter 4 of his first letter to the church at Corinth, a pretty ragged congregation that seems to have been giving him a hard time. They were apparently rating him negatively against better preachers, and in general scrutinizing his ministry and griping about it while holding themselves in very high esteem.

That may not sound like a very promising place to go to inspire persons on the verge of going into the ministry. But that, my friends, is where you may find yourself at some point. And like Paul, you may realize that it is in just such spotlighted moments of outside scrutiny that you will want to check yourself on what you are about and so discover whose judgment really matters.

Paul begins where he must begin and where he always begins, setting forth a definition of himself and those like him—“think of us”—as “servants of Christ.” I am passing that on from Paul with the suggestion that you make it your primary self-understanding as you take up the calling of the Christian ministry. You leave here and go out, whatever the particular call may be, as servants of Christ. You do not go primarily to be a pastor or to teach or to

build up the church or to mend broken souls. One's understanding of the ministry may involve all sorts of things that are tied to particular ministries or tasks, to certain competencies or affinities—I am a teaching minister; you may be a minister to the poor or to young people. But these are not the heart of the matter, not the orienting center. You go as servants of Christ, those whose competence and ineptness, whose pastoral counseling and preaching, are features of an existence primarily defined by the fact that we are servants of a Lord. All we do is shaped by that point of reference.

We should note that Paul's term for "servants" here is not quite what we might expect. It is not the familiar *doulos* or *diakonos*, the standard New Testament terms for slave or servant. It is *hypēretēs*, a word that indeed means the service of another but puts the focus less on the activity of service than it does on the free choice to follow direction. It could refer to various kinds of assistants, helpers, persons who worked under the direction and control of another: a physician's assistant, a synagogue attendant, a priest's helper, as one person has defined the term, "one who assists another as the instrument of his will."¹ Paul never uses the term again, but he had heard it at a crucial point in his life. When on the Damascus road, on his way under the authority of the chief priests to persecute the Christians, he was stopped by a blinding light from heaven and a voice that spoke to him and forever changed his life. The words that voice spoke were, "Stand on your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you a servant"—a *hypēretēn* (Acts 26:16).

As with Paul, what shapes our ministry is the awareness and conviction that we are *under orders*, that like the pointing finger of John the Baptist in Matthias Grünewald's great painting of the crucifixion, all our gestures in preaching, all our offered hands in ministry, all our arms lifted in prayer, point in one direction, to the one who has called us into his service and under whose orders we go forth into the world. Like the *hypēretēs* in the synagogue at Nazareth in Luke 4, when Christ reads the Scriptures, you hold the book—and hold it well—that's what all this exegetical and theological and homiletical work has been about. Like the *hypēretēs* of the word who delivered the tradition about Jesus Christ to Luke, so you are under the direction of that word to pass on the tradition about the Lord. Think of us as servants of Christ, those who are under orders from their Lord and directed by his word.

But that is not all Paul offers us by way of self-definition. He thinks of himself and bids us think of ourselves as "stewards of God's mysteries." And each of those words is an important part of his claim and your calling. It is

¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, vol. 8, 1972), 539.

God's mysteries that are entrusted to us, says Paul. Never forget that. We sometimes speak of the pastor as the theologian of the community. That sounds very much like how an academic community would regard the work of the ministry. If so, then *mea culpa*. I think that is *exactly* what Paul is talking about, the conviction that his whole life was set to speak about God and what God was doing in Jesus Christ and what that had to do with everything, from the way masters and slaves related to each other to how you ate food, to your attitude to the state, and how you spoke to your elders and officers.

There are many things you will do in your ministry, but all of them are tied to your commitment to the things of God, to the speaking and preaching and acting that point to the one who has made us, in whose hands our lives are cared for, and who calls us to the life that does not end. In those moments that mark human life in regular fashion—birth, baptism, marriage, children—and all the daily provision of life that each of us receives, you will help your people, your students, your families, your rich and your poor, find and discern the work of God. In those moments that sting and cripple and sadden and destroy our lives, you will bring the strong comfort of God. You will point to a source of strength that is there when all human strength has finally fallen into nothingness.

But what does Paul mean when he says that it is the *mysteries* of God that are entrusted to our care? For Paul and for us, the mystery of God is most clearly revealed in the gospel, in that good news that overcomes all the bad news that can ever come down our path. It is a mystery that the wise cannot discern, only a fool for Christ. To be a steward of the mysteries of God is to be entrusted with the gospel, to be now and forever the bearer of a piece of good news to those you serve: You don't have to be afraid. I am with you. I will deliver you. That is the good news underlying everything else, the word from the Lord that can transform the lives of your people. Do not hold it back, you who are becoming stewards of the mysteries of God.

Paul is quite clear what it means to be *stewards* of the divine mysteries: "Moreover," he writes, "it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy." And I am going to risk the claim that that is what you have been about over these past years here at Princeton Seminary, to prepare yourselves to be stewards of the mysteries of God, but more specifically so that you may be found trustworthy in that enterprise. You are going to be responsible for some pretty powerful stuff. Every time you walk into a pulpit, your stewardship of those mysteries is on the line. Every time you stand by a sick bed of any sort, you are responsible for the secrets of God. When you lay your hands on the head of a child in baptism and say "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," you are a steward of God's

mysteries. When you stand over the grave of a parishioner and say "I am the resurrection and the life" and speak to the ones whose loss is beyond bearing, you are at that moment entrusted with the mysteries of God. When you say to the congregation those amazing words, "I declare unto you in the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven," you are a steward of the mysteries of God.

This is not something confined to ministerial acts as pastor and preacher or to ordination as such. So those of you whose vocation in service to Christ carries you into teaching and healing ministries, do not think you can avoid the power that is in your hands and the mystery that is given to you. As you learn to teach, learn that what you are doing is a holy act. When you take up the things of God, whether they are biblical texts, theological doctrines, or acts of ministry—when you take them up in order to teach others, know that you are dealing always with what is holy and with the mysteries of God.

What is required in all this, Paul tells us, is that we be trustworthy. The issue of the ministry is not finally success. It is faithfulness. It is the refusal to forsake the gospel in a world that does not believe there really is good news or to tell lies in a world that seeks easy answers to the deepest questions. I really do believe the ministry is a very precious calling. How precious it is you will come to know as you experience the power of the ministry to heal souls, to change lives, to make the wounded whole, through God's power at work within you to shape and mold minds and hearts to the faithful service of God.

Three weeks after I arrived to begin my ministry in a small South Carolina church, straight out of school and not even ordained yet, our Sunday lunch in the manse next door to the church was interrupted by a woman running down the driveway shouting, "The McDowells have been in a terrible car accident on the way home from church." I hardly knew who the McDowells were. I did know Lester was chair of the board of deacons and Jane a member of the choir. Even worse, I did not know what to do. The only thing I could think of was to go to the one hospital in town. So I did, and shortly after I arrived the family was brought in on stretchers in various kinds of terrible condition. Lester's father John McDowell, a former clerk of session who had dropped out of church with alcohol problems and whom I had not even met, showed up about the same time. I introduced myself to him and in his shock and grief he looked at me with astonishment and said, "When did you get here?" He could not believe that I was there before any of the victims arrived. I, of course, was there because I did not know anywhere else to go. But that one act was a transforming moment and opened the doors to a caring ministry with that family that has not ended yet, though Lester died that afternoon and his wife Jane has been in a wheelchair able to speak only

difficulty for over forty years. My friends, there is nothing else you can ever do that can give so much with so little and receive so much for so little.

The faithful preaching of the gospel in the world in which we live, however, does not always heal the wounds. Sometimes it uncovers festering sores; sometimes it identifies with terrible clarity the sin that the Lord alone can overcome. You are playing with fire when you seek to speak and interpret the word of God. That is a dangerous occupation. One can get burned. And the greatest risk to your health and well-being may be the God whose mysteries have been entrusted to you. The one who is not seen or comprehended, who comes to us in the fire that illuminates but cannot be touched or grasped. This is no game we are playing. It is the responsibility to think and speak and act about what matters most in this world, to seek to interpret to human beings their whence and whither, to dare to help people encounter the one who made them and this universe, to offer the word of life that we have no power to give except as we are under orders.

So what's the bottom line? Paul knew, and we probably should pay attention. He says, "It really matters very little to me if I should be judged or scrutinized by you or by any human court." I doubt that means Paul was invulnerable to the criticisms of his peers and colleagues in the ministry or those of his congregations at Corinth and elsewhere. He was quite human and spoke of those things that did him in or moved him to tears. And yet he says, "it matters very little." I believe you can say the same thing—but only because of what Paul goes on to say: "It is *the Lord* who judges me."

It is not my colleagues or your teachers, who have given you lots of grades, not your future elders or bishops, who will scrutinize your work very carefully. It is not finally whether a congregation thinks you have blown it or are the best minister they have ever had. "It is the Lord who judges me," says Paul—and you also. I hope you find that word both encouraging and scary—because it really is.

The calling is worth the risk, my friends and fellow servants of Christ. To be under orders to this Lord means to be free from all other powers. To be entrusted with the mysteries of this God is to have in your hands that which is more precious than anything else there is. So go, and be faithful with what is being entrusted to you. And may the one who has called you bless you in all that you do.

Sin, Creativity, and the Christian Life

By SERENE JONES AND
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A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping.
Rachel weeping for her children and
refusing to be comforted,
because her children are no more. (Jeremiah 31:15)

“Let it be unto me as you have said.
Behold, I am the Lord’s handmaiden.” (Luke 2:38)

LET us begin by saying how pleased we are to be here. It is a real honor to be invited to give Princeton’s WICAM lecture, and it is particularly exciting that you asked the two of us to do it together. Although we are long-time friends and fellow scholars, until this evening, we have never before had the chance to collaborate on a public project like this. Over the years, we have discovered that as theologians, we share a great deal. We both work on Reformed theology, which means, among many things, that we both have a quirky desire to read people such as Calvin and Barth for fun! We are also both ordained ministers in Reformed traditions and are actively involved in our churches at a local and national level.

In addition to these professional commonalities, we are both moms who are constantly scrambling around trying to figure out how to hold down demanding work lives while also being good parents and staying healthy and whole as individuals. Both of us also struggle with creativity in our work lives and our home lives: we are writers and teachers and homemakers; and in all these settings, we see our labor as a form of art, as a craft that we carefully attend to, as an aesthetically formed enterprise.

Another dimension of our shared perspective as theologians is our common grounding as feminist theologians. What do we mean by this term “feminist”? It is a rather loaded word to use in a seminary setting these days because it means such dramatically different things to different people. For

some, the term sounds quite radical and “out-there”; feminism looks to them like a movement that wants to destroy families and, even worse, reject the Trinity! For others, the word seems to signal just the opposite, something too old-fashioned and outdated to be relevant today—something women back in the seventies did, something no longer needed in our post-feminist age. Suffice it to say that we do not find ourselves reflected in either of these views. For us, feminism is an alive, pertinent, richly creative, and, in its own way, deeply traditional dimension of who we are as women of faith.

In this regard, we both have a distinctly theological (and Reformed) understanding of the task and nature of feminism. In our minds, to be feminists means that, emboldened by our faith in God, we are actively seeking to build a world where all people, women and men alike, flourish, where God’s creation is nurtured, and where God’s will for justice, beauty, and mercy prevails. We pursue this vision with a special eye on women and the challenges raised by their diverse lives. We ask what things presently (and in the past) hinder the flourishing of women; in this context, we are committed to looking at the causes of women’s oppression. But this is not all of it. We are also interested in exploring what special gifts of practice and insight women might bring to our collective flourishing. We thus give a special place to women’s wisdom and the faithful visions of the future embedded therein.

With respect to the activities of both identifying the conditions of women’s oppression and articulating a vision of what their flourishing might consist of, we strongly suspect that most of what we regularly identify as feminine or masculine attributes are produced by our collective social conventions and our shared cultural imaginations and not by some inevitable force of nature or biological necessity. In the contemporary language of feminist theory, this means that we view *gender as a social construct*. We also believe that if we, as Christians, are to move forward in our collective theological thinking about women, we need to be willing to question many of our presuppositions not only about what women can and should be but about what men can and should be as well.

All this is to say that, in our experience, many of what Christians have named as natural features of our gendered differences (as men and women) simply are not natural; rather, they are stories we have dreamed up—often in our churches—and called natural, sometimes for good reasons, although at other times, for reasons not so positive. In this regard, gender is itself an artifact of the human process of creative production. Our gender myths are tales crafted by our cultural minds and passed down through the generations by the habits of our cultural bodies. As feminist theologians, we are actively

engaged in an ongoing process of re-crafting these “stories” about gender in the hope that by bringing our faith to bear on them, we might create new stories that better reflect what it means to be God’s beloved creatures in today’s world.

It is an exciting time to be rethinking gender from a Christian feminist perspective. We live in an age when many of the most obvious structural walls surrounding gender roles have been broken down in the areas of family life, work life, church life, and intellectual life. Our concrete social forms have shifted dramatically. It is also clear to us, however, that while many of us living in the United States today may have adapted to these shifts in our material lives—such as women working in upper management and men taking on more parenting responsibilities—there is another level at which many of our deepest internal, psychic convictions about gender remain untouched. For example, at work, most people perceive men as being better bosses, and at home, most women still do a disproportionately large percentage of house cleaning, emotional supporting, and child rearing. Although our social worlds may have changed, our imaginations and the patterns of relating they engender have yet to catch up.

As theologians, we are well aware that the task of shaping imagination is, perhaps, the hardest work of all, particularly when it comes to those bone-deep truths that structure the most fundamental features of our overarching worldviews. As theologians, we also recognize that it matters enormously what people believe—what they imagine—about God and the nature of humanity. In the tradition, Christian communities have long acknowledged the important role of belief formation and the shaping of faith-imaginings, and we have addressed this through the ongoing creative activities of preaching, teaching, prayer, liturgy, and the many other complexly textured patterns of life that shape our daily interactions. Included among these activities is the enterprise we undertake here tonight, the work of systematic theological reflection.

Sin

In the history of the Christian tradition, one of the major themes that has structured Christian faith-imaginings is the theme of *sin*, our topic today, and one about which Reformed theologians such as Calvin and Barth had plenty to say. In fact, each of them engaged in dramatically rethinking the doctrine for their own age. This topic has also played a central role in the reflections of feminist theologians over the past fifty years. Indeed, Valerie Saiving’s article on sin was one of the classic, groundbreaking works that

began contemporary feminist theology. In it, she argues that Christians need to expand their imaginative categories for naming sin to include the experience of women.¹ She suggests that the fruit of sin that many women produce does not derive from the classical Augustinian sin of excessive self-centeredness but rather from the sin of excessive self-loss. She presses us to imagine that sin is manifest not just in dispositions of robust pride but also in dispositions marked by self-disintegration.² In response to her critical assessment of sin, a number of other feminist theologians took up the task of thinking about sin in similar ways, focusing on the question, What does sin look like when the sinner in question is socialized to be subservient rather than dominating?

In the years following the publication of that important article, feminist theology entered a period of reflection in which the task was not so much to internally redefine sin as Saiving had, but more to call into question Christianity's obsession with sin in the first place, particularly with respect to notions of sin associated with human embodiment, sexuality, and, most problematically, femininity. During this period, we were asked to imagine the body not as inherently bad or evil but as good and pleasurable, to see sex not as intrinsically sinful but as a gift of God, and to see women not just as progeny of the temptress Eve but as part of God's beloved, complex creation. It is important to note that in these theologies, the *concept* of sin—not the *fruit* of sin—was identified as the problem from which Christianity needed to be redeemed.³ We should also note that, in all these works, the *doctrine of creation* was the locus for their systematic theological reflections on sin.

In the past decade, the interests of feminist theology have begun to shift yet again. No longer is the doctrine of creation considered the primary locus within which feminists might reflect on sin, theological anthropology, and the issue of gender broadly conceived. A new generation of feminist theologians has begun to explore what gender looks like when considered in the context of the *doctrine of redemption*. With this shift to redemption, we have also seen a resurgence of interest in the positive value of sin-talk as a feature of feminist theology. It is this conversation that we are part of this evening. Along with feminist theologians such as Kathryn Tanner, Joy McDougal, and Delores Williams, we understand sin-talk as an essential feature of a com-

¹ Valerie Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* 40 (April 1960): 100–112.

² For a broader discussion of sin and its history in Reformed thought and feminism, see Serene Jones, "Sin," in *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

³ Feminist theologians who have developed this understanding of sin include Rita Nakashima Brock, Rebecca Parker, Catherine Keller, and Rosemary Radford Ruether.

prehensive Christian systematic theology. Not only do we believe that it is a crucial component in our understanding of human brokenness, but, perhaps even more importantly, we also believe that it is an absolutely invaluable part of our Christian comprehension of the reality of saving grace. In both instances, reflections on sin have significant impact on how we understand the nature of human creativity, in general, and the creativity of women, in particular.

During the rest of our lecture this evening, we are going to talk about sin in ways both traditional and new. In fact, at times you might not even realize how traditional and orthodox we actually are because the claims we articulate may sound, at least on first hearing, rather unconventional. That is one of the great things about dealing with a tradition that is as diverse and eccentric as Christianity: it is chock full of insights that still have the capacity to surprise and push us in ways that may seem extra-ordinary or just downright peculiar and even uncomfortable. Some of you may find this to be the case with three claims that are going to ground our reflections on sin, three very traditional Calvinist claims.

First, we believe that whatever we say about sin, we need to recognize that as a theological idea, our sin-talk should serve to strengthen Christian faith, not weaken it. In this regard, our concepts of sin should never be fashioned or deployed in a manner designed to harm people, to break their spirits, to marginalize them, to destroy their sense of belovedness, or to constrain the conditions of their flourishing. Unfortunately, in the history of the Christian tradition, sin-talk has at times been used to do this—to break down people and communities rather than to faithfully strengthen and build them up. This is so particularly with respect to women. The best way to ensure that this not happen is to constantly remember that, according to the Reformed tradition, there is no knowledge of sin apart from a prior knowledge of grace. To use a colloquial image, you do not know that you are sick until you receive the good news that you have been cured. You do not see how broken your world is until, in Christ, you are able to see, in its full splendor, the grace that God has already poured upon us all. This means that the gospel affirmation of women's essential goodness should always be the foundational truth upon which other statements about our brokenness are built. As we will discuss shortly, this is particularly true when it comes to women's creativity, itself a reality marked doubly by grace and sin.

Related to this is a second crucial theological claim about sin. In our contemporary culture, it is easy for people to think about sin as "those bad things that people do." Sin, viewed in this way, names all the morally problematic behaviors we see around us or find within us. While this view

does not entirely misidentify sin—sin surely includes within its scope a large spectrum of behavior and attitudes that seem to thwart human flourishing—the central characteristic of sin in the Reformed tradition is not equated with such bad acts but is identified, at its root, with a deeper state of being. To be in sin is to be alienated from God. “Sin” describes human life that is not oriented toward God, life that does not unfold in full knowledge of God’s love and desire for the flourishing of creation. To be in sin, then, is first and foremost to be unaware of grace, to live without God, or—to use Calvin’s favorite term—to live in a state of “unfaithfulness.” In this state, one could conceivably live a fully moral, upright life—avoiding many of the acts we call “sin”—and still be fundamentally in a state of sin because one has not accepted the fullness of grace that God has bestowed upon humanity. Our ignorance or denial of that grace might grow out of a worldview in which we think that we do not need God because we are grand masters of our own universe or, in quite a different way, out of a worldview in which we think we are finally alone and helplessly lost in a world where there is no God, a world where no one cares if we live or die. It is not difficult to see why either of these godless states would be a hellish reality for the person who, unaware of grace, wanders through life without the sustaining knowledge of God’s unceasing love and nurture. Correlatively, it is not hard to imagine how one’s fundamental orientation to God—be it faithful or alienated—affects one’s experience of creativity.

The third insight guiding our reflections is this: when we think about how sin is concretely manifest in our everyday patterns of life, we must affirm a number of dialectical tensions. First, we need to identify sin both as something we do (we sin) and as something that happens to us (we are sinned against). Second, sin is something that we are consciously responsible for enacting (sin is willful) and yet is also part of a social reality that we do not will and cannot escape (sin is inescapably social). Third, sin is something that we experience as individuals (sin is personal) and yet is also a reality that is corporately enacted and lived (sin is collective). Holding on to these irresolvable tensions in our discussions of sin is not an easy thing in a world that wants simplistic accounts of the human condition. Even so, Christians strongly believe that these are essential features of our fallen humanity, a humanity marked simultaneously by both sin and grace. When viewed from the perspective of the God who creates, loves, and seeks to redeem us, we are—each of us apart and all of us together—both saints and sinners, both beloved and scorned, both freed and imprisoned. What ripe fields for feminist reflection!

Creativity, Beauty, and Imagination

To understand the relationship between sin and creativity, we thought it would be helpful not only to discuss what we think sin is, but to say more about how we are using the term “creativity” theologically. Our understanding of creativity goes something like this: As creatures made by the Creator God, we are called to participate actively in God’s good creation. This participation of humanity in creation is what we refer to generally as “creativity.” The challenge of the Christian life, in this context, is to determine how this creativity might best be enacted. When we live faithfully, we seek to mirror God’s own creative intentions for the world. This is *faithful creativity*, creativity in its truest form. If our creativity manifests forms of life that thwarts God’s divine will for human flourishing, however, it is sinful. When this occurs, our creative actions are corrupted and distorted, and true creativity fails to be expressed and enacted. Yet by living in conformity with God’s intentions, we act in ways that please God, that delight our Creator and hence delight and enrich the whole of creation, including ourselves. We then embody or image what the Reformed tradition has referred to as “the glory of God.” *Women’s creativity, at its best, entails embodying this glory.*

But what exactly does it mean to “embody the glory of God”? In a well-known phrase, Calvin refers to creation as “the theater of God’s glory.” In making this reference, he suggests that when we look at the beauty and complexity of the vast world around us, we should be awed by the breadth and depth of God’s own beauty displayed within it. Glory is thus something that both God and the world share. God creates it, and we see it, participate in it, and hence “bear it.” The phrase conjures up images of the world shimmering and shining with marks of God’s grace, a world handcrafted by a wondrous divine artisan, a world that shows forth the marvel of God’s own blessed goodness. This glory, we should further note, not only describes the manifest brilliance of creation; in the Reformed tradition, we insist that it describes even more perfectly the beauty shown to us in Jesus Christ, the revealed embodiment of divine glory in its greatest splendor. Here, then, glory marks our understanding of both creation and redemption.

At the heart of these descriptions is the claim that glory is something that we apprehend not just intellectually but through the full range of our senses; it is imaged and embodied. We can taste, touch, see, feel, smell, and hear it. This implies that glory has to do with form, shape, and substance. When something in our created world bears a resemblance, at the level of material form, to God’s own blessed intentions for the world, it is “glorious.” The term thus highlights the distinctly aesthetic dimensions of God’s creative

work. When the world shimmers and shines with God's glory, we experience it as aesthetically pleasing or beautiful. When we embody God's glory (God's creative intentions) in our acts of creativity, we too participate in making our lives and our world more beautiful places, places that radiate with graced possibility. Hence, it is fair to say that when we are faithfully creative, our acts are beautiful reflections of God's glory—be they the work of cleaning the house, grading papers, or hiking through the park. Even more vivid are those explicit forms of artistic production—painting, writing, weaving, dancing, and so forth—that we undertake as expressions of our ongoing engagement in God's intention for creation. In other words, when we are creative—faithfully creative—the glory of God is made concretely present in the beauty we see and feel.

Let us explain in more detail why we think this understanding of graced creativity is important and why comprehending its obverse is equally crucial. When we exercise creativity without imagining God's creative intentions, we risk constructing a "hyperreality" that has no relationship to God's desire for the restoration of the world. Creativity divorced from imagining what God desires produces fantasy worlds that serve as escapes from reality. Creativity grounded in imagining the glory of God leads us to participate, as people of faith, in creating a world that we believe is possible (despite appearances to the contrary).

Because history has proven that creativity has been used to construct fantasy worlds rather than to imagine a world that embodies God's glory, people of faith have sometimes understood creativity as antithetical to the good. To be good, to be religious, to be faithful is precisely *not* to be creative, in this understanding. Here, we might understand ourselves to be responsible for "signing on to God's agenda," but certainly not in any way to imagine what this might entail or to think of ourselves as integral to it, embodying God's glory. Unfortunately, this separation of the good from the beautiful, of faithfulness from creativity, has led to the misconception that the good is boring. According to the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, for example, "'the good' has lost its attraction because it is cut off from beauty."⁴ By contrast to this, we suggest, an incarnational faith insists on pursuing the beautiful, or "imagining embodying the glory of God" by realizing our identity as creative agents. Again, as von Balthasar puts it: "Though beauty and being have become separated in the modern imagina-

⁴ Cited in William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 90.

tion, their integration was accomplished in Christ, the true Word and image of God, who was not only believed, but seen.”⁵

When thus conceived, creativity as imagining embodying the glory of God leads to the transformation of sinful structures that rob us of life. As Belden Lane puts it, citing Tolkein, “In a world [that is the product of the imagination], one encounters the unexpected breaking in of joy beyond the walls of a world bound by fear and despair.”⁶ Creativity propelled by imagining embodying the glory of God leads us to embrace the work that brings God’s Kin-dom to earth as it is in heaven.

Creativity, understood this way, raises a number of interesting questions about the nature of the Christian life and its goal of embodying God’s glory. How do we, as human beings, act creatively in ways that are both faithful and beautiful? Moreover, how does our creativity unfold in ways that are not only in principle good for the world and ourselves but are also very concretely pleasurable to us, ways that delight us and bring us joy, ways that truly make us happy? Similarly, how do we respond to situations where our creativity is misdirected or distorted, situations where either we create in ways destructive of human flourishing or we are so harmed by others that we cannot create at all? How does sin affect our creativity, and how might we create in the midst of sin, our own as well as others’? Even more particularly, how might we construe the effects of sin on the creativity of women? What features of their lives can our discussion of sin and beauty illumine?

To explore questions like these, particularly as they pertain to the lives of women, we have identified five theological features of “the self” that we believe are crucial to our creativity: (1) *agency*: our God-given capacity to act and hence to be creative; (2) *time*: our God-created capacity to imagine the future and to remember the past and—within the space of these—to compose our lives; (3) *voice*: our created ability to articulate and embrace our particularity, our call to be individuals with unique gifts to offer in the context of community; (4) *permission*: God’s divine gift of forgiveness that allows us not to be perfect but to live nonetheless in grace as we creatively act and express our particularity; and (5) *call*: the gift of Christian vocation, the reality that we are each called to live in faithful relation to God and others in this graceful dance of creation and creativity.

We now turn to a consideration of how Reformed understandings of sin might help us think in new ways about these features of creativity in women’s

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Belden Lane, “Fantasy and the Geography of Faith,” *Theology Today* 50, no. 3 (October 1993): 400. We are indebted to Reno Lauro for directing our attention to von Balthasar and Lane.

lives. In good Reformed fashion, our argument is fundamentally dialogical; it requires thinking in two ways simultaneously without reducing one line of thought to the other. First, we will explore the ways in which experiences of traumatic violence in our lives can disable our capacity to create in manners that enhance our lives and the lives of others. In other words, we will explore how certain forms of sin can diminish creativity and then, correlatively, what saving grace might look like in such a context. Second, we will suggest how understanding ourselves as “sinners” can, in some instances, enable us more faithfully to create with joy and beauty, particularly in contexts where lived experience of harm seems to have stunted our abilities to craft our world in meaningful ways. Looking at Reformed notions of original sin, we will show why the doctrine of sin might be a useful aid in the Christian call to glory in the Divine. The reality of violence and sin that destroys our creativity and the reality of a form of sin-talk that can enable creativity—these two perspectives on sin, when brought together, form a productive site for a complex feminist appreciation of the character of sinful, graced humanity.

Our Scriptural Companions

In the course of our conversations about this lecture, we realized that we kept coming back to two women from scripture who, we imagined, may have struggled with issues similar to our own. Following the insight of John Calvin, who described scripture as the “lens of faith,” we decided to introduce you to these women who served as our “lens” and to explain to you how their stories helped us think theologically about the topics at hand. As you will see, the tales of their lives are very different from each other and in many ways from our own, and yet the insights that emerge from each, we believe, illuminate starkly different but interrelated features of both sin and creativity as they are played out in Christian existence as we understand it today.

Imagine with us, if you will, the unexpected meeting of two women on a dusty road on a hill outside the walls of Jerusalem. They are the same age and, in their youth, could well have been mistaken for sisters. Their encounter is brief. They are not even aware of the other as they draw near: each is too lost in her own world of grief and memory to take in the presence of a stranger.

The taller of the two women is not crying; she is standing on the side of the road, staring off toward the hill’s horizon where three bodies hang nailed to roughly constructed crosses. Her face bears a blankness that bespeaks feelings too enormous to name. Her frame is etched, still, unmoving, frozen against the hot afternoon sky. The smaller woman is

walking away from the hill, her back turned to the crosses. A friend walks close by, helping her take steps; she stumbles frequently, her face streaked with muddied tears, her eyes closed.

At the point on the road where their paths cross, the weeping woman stops to rest. Suddenly overcome by waves of grief, she begins to cry into the shoulder of her accompanying friend. She sobs out words that sound something like "My son, my son." The other woman, momentarily startled out of her numbed reverie, looks in the wailing woman's direction and knows who she is immediately. Without moving, she mouths the same words, as if speaking a mantra worn thin through years of repetition, "My son, my son." Their eyes meet for a brief moment, and we wait to see if they will speak.

Who are these two women? If we had met them in their younger years, we would have seen them alive with creative energy, young mothers exhausted but hopeful about the future stretching before them. We step into their worlds, and we imagine what it is like for them to imagine embodying the glory of God, what sin looks like from the context of their space.

The smaller of the two is Mary, the one we now know as the mother of Jesus. In scripture, when we first meet her, she is presented to us as a meek but powerful woman who is called to bear Divinity within her, the quintessential model of creativity. We imagine walking with Mary, the peasant woman whom the church later came to identify as "the Mother of God." We remember that God called upon Mary to act as a creative agent in the world, to look toward the future of God's reign and to participate in it. Mary visits Elizabeth, giving voice to the Magnificat, boldly embracing her calling. Truly this peasant, virgin woman is able against all odds to imagine embodying the glory of God.

The other woman is less known to us. Some of you may have glimpsed her in your reading of the Gospel of Matthew; for others, she may have never appeared in the theater of your scriptural imagination at all. She is an elusive figure; some biblical scholars tell us her story is fictional. But in our minds, she is a vivid presence; and in the landscape of Jesus' own world, a woman's life much like hers most surely existed, perhaps in numbers too large for us even to imagine. As she watches the man called Jesus crucified on the cross, it is hard for us to know by her expression whether she is relieved or grieved by his execution. She has a scar running across her face that she received from a soldier's sword almost thirty years before, the day they came to her village and in a brutal act of state-ordered terror executed her two-year-old son, her only baby, her beloved offspring. She is a survivor of Roman imperial

violence, the victim of genocidal war crimes, a mother who never saw her son grow into his thirties. As she stands on that road, we imagine that perhaps she sees Mary weeping and feels envy that this woman at least saw her child grow up. Perhaps she even feels his execution is justified, if she realizes this is the one for whom her son died. Who is this haunting figure? We have given her the name Rachel. She is a woman whose own crucifixion began long before Jesus even set his eyes toward Jerusalem. She is a woman who has been undone by traumatic violence; her spirit fractured by that mythic event the Christian tradition has named “the Slaughter of the Innocents.”

How do we think about sin, creativity, and the Christian life together? For us, one answer lies in thinking about Rachel’s and Mary’s stories both separately and together, the stories of two women whose parallel lives brought them, that afternoon, to the cross of Jesus—and to each other; two “creative” souls whose youthful voices give us both the verdant poetry of Luke’s Magnificat and the tragic lament of Jeremiah’s wailing woman; two women whose pasts tell us much about their future.

Rachel’s Story: Trauma and Creativity

Let us begin with Rachel. How does this woman’s imagined story frame our thinking about creativity and sin? What can our construal of her experience allow us to see about the place of brokenness and grace in our own lives? When we think about sin in contemporary theology, there are two major images that come to mind. As suggested earlier, we think about individual sin as morally bad acts that people commit; if we are broad minded, we couple this with an understanding of social sin as the reality of larger structures of oppression that diminish the flourishing of humanity. We want to suggest that what Rachel gives us is a third picture of sin, one that stands in the gap between individual agential sin and structural social evil. She allows us to see, in painful detail, what a particular form of social sin called “traumatic violence” does to individuals when it inhabits their reality. She gives a picture of the self unraveled by the sinful destructiveness of our world, the self upon whom terror has fallen, someone to whom sin has happened and within whom the consequences of this sin are embodied in profoundly intimate ways. In other words, she gives us a view of sin that is simultaneously collective and individual, both structural and personal, both political and private. She gives us a view of sin that allows us to see the complex ways it affects her capacity to be creative and to embody the glory of God.

In our efforts to understand this dimension of our human experience of sin, we have found the insights of recent work in trauma theory to be enormously

helpful. The word “trauma,” in fact, literally means “wound.” Trauma theory, then, describes the aftereffects suffered by persons who have experienced events of overwhelming violence which they perceived to threaten their very lives and which they were powerless to resist. According to the work of psychologists, after such events, persons can suffer a disintegration of capacities that many of us consider to be inherent features of personhood and creativity. A sense of agency, time, memory, embodiment, hope, voice, a capacity for relationship, the ability to experience pleasure—all of these features of the self are challenged at a psychic level.

Today, we call it by a more clinical name: post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. Research has shown that this undoing can happen to individuals as well as whole collectives, to children as well as adults, to persons as different as housewives and military personnel, and survivors of a car accident or nuclear disaster. Although traumatic events never happen in exactly the same way and the people who experience them never feel their effects with identical force, the literature on trauma tells us there are remarkably similar features that seem to cut across the large spectrum of violence that can produce it. They include such things as a disabled sense of agency, a constant reliving of the violence in dreams or flashbacks, an inability to remember the original event and hence a disconnected relation to memory itself, feelings of physical dissociation from one’s body or present place in time, and a loss of voice or the sense that one’s views and actions can positively affect one’s surrounding environment.

Although there is much more to be said about these features of trauma as they live in people’s souls, today we want to explore how these traumatic symptoms impact our capacity to be faithfully creative. If we interpret the damage that traumatic violence does to people as a form of sin that “happens to them” and that they are then compelled to “live,” then how might we construe the connection between this form of sin and the Christian call to be creative?

To answer this question, return with us to Rachel.

In our imagination, we see her standing there on that hilltop wrapped in an old, worn red silk cloth. It covers her from head to toe, shielding her from the world around her. It seems to be holding her together, albeit in a ragged, tattered sort of way. Thirty years ago, Rachel wove this cloth on a loom in her home near Bethlehem. In her youth, she was widely known as one of the finest weavers in the area, celebrated for the intricate designs of her fabrics. But since that day, a day she cannot remember, her hands have been unable to touch the loom. It sits dusty

and still in the corner of her room, the child's tunic she was making rotting between its braces.

Today, she twists this remnant of her former brilliance in her hands, wringing its ragged edges tightly. The cloth that holds her is wearing thin. She has begun to think she is too old to create again, having lost the most beautiful creation of her life, her child, to a calculated act of state-sanctioned violence, a military sword, in the deserts of the Middle East. She is the fractured creative spirit of many: wounded, unable to bear forth the glory of God that is in her.

What has befallen Rachel?

First, let's look at her sense of *agency* in light of what we know about the long-term aftereffects of traumatic violence. The clinical literature tells us that it often leads to feelings of utter powerlessness, feelings that reflect the experience of powerlessness experienced in the original event. We imagine Rachel on that fated afternoon this way. When the young soldiers came to take her son from her arms, she tried to hold on to him but could not. She tried to stop them but could not. She struggled against them but failed, and, in the days that followed, she slowly lost the capacity to imagine herself as an actor in the world at all. She lost the sense she had always had before that she could intend an action—one as simple as feeding her child—and then do it, see its effects, and take responsibility for its consequences. No longer! Now she lives in the prison of a victim's imagination. Not only are intentions and actions severed in her mind, but action itself has become a burdened possibility, one enjoyed by others but, alas, not by those who, like her, are dead of soul.

Second, what of Rachel's sense of *time*, her capacity to envision a future and remember a past and, out of this, craft a present? The literature on trauma tells us that these events of violence often lead to memory loss. To not remember is, in fact, to remember an event that was too overwhelming to comprehend even in its occurrence. In Rachel's case, imagine with us that she has only fragmented memories of that day. When she hears a barking dog, she often flashes back to a horrified blankness. When she smells fish cooking, as if it were that morning, she feels nauseous. Having lost the past and her will, the future becomes for her not a place of expectation, but just further space into which she is forced to move, to tread out her years in depressed aloneness. To be able to weave, to create beauty on her loom, she not only needs to imagine that her actions matter; she also needs to imagine that her creative work has a future. She cannot.

Third, to be creative, a person needs to have at least a minimal sense of having a personal *voice*. This can take the form of knowing that one has a substantial body or a bounded identity. It involves knowing that you are “somebody” with something to say, something to create. In contrast to this, trauma survivors often dissociate; they psychically disconnect from their experiences of embodiment. They become numb and often lose a sense of the boundaries that mark the edge of self; they become unable to distinguish where they end and others begin. In Rachel’s case, this unboundedness is symbolized by her inability to weave new clothes to cover her body. She cannot craft a shawl capable of enveloping her, warming her, protecting her from rain and cold and the pitying stares of others. She has only a worn rag to adorn her, a rag left over from the day her hell began. She has been, it seems, strewn into the world.

Fourth, when Rachel was learning to weave, she grew to see that imperfection was inevitable and that she had *permission*, as an artist, to fail or to not “get it right” as she worked her craft. Sometimes the loom would drop a stitch, sometimes the silk would tear or a wool thread bundle into knots; and because the color of the dye was never even, she learned to find beauty in its shifting hues and not an imagined evenness. Accepting these flaws was key not only to Rachel’s ability to find pleasure in the movement of her loom but also, and even more importantly, to her having the courage to keep working when the material she created was not exactly to her design. But thirty years ago, this all changed. When we see her standing on Golgotha, we see a Rachel who has replaced that forgiving discipline of heart and mind with another, unforgiving habit of thought that keeps her hands still, her heart frozen. As with many trauma survivors, she finds herself constantly replaying the events of that day in her imagination—the fractured parts she remembers—and trying to get the ending right, trying to fantasize her way to a different future in which her son lives. It is called “the compulsion to repeat,” and it haunts her sleeping as well as her waking. In her anxious search for a perfect ending to a story she cannot undo, she remains perpetually caught in its mimetic replay of horror. For her, imperfection has terrifying consequences, its cost so high that she cannot embrace even its possibility. And in her refusal of that possibility lies her prison.

Finally, what of call and of the Christian notion of *vocation*? What of the theological claim that faithful creativity will have as its *telos* the glorifying of God and the flourishing of community? What of Rachel’s capacity for understanding her life as having a direction and her ability to see that direction intentionally unfolding in the context of community? To answer this, recall that we see her standing alone on the roadside; Mary is the one

with a companion. The literature on trauma tells us that survivors have a hard time forming relationships with others because their fundamental trust in the world has been violated. Could it be that when Rachel looks over at Mary and the followers of Jesus who surround her, she is puzzled by what she knows of their devotion to him and the deep friendships among them? She cannot trust enough to join a group of any sort, much less concentrate long enough to have listened to and understood one of Jesus' sermons. As for her faith, yes, she is Jewish. But what does that mean? She was born and will die in a land marked by imperial domination, and it is because of her Hebrew ancestry that her son was slaughtered. Had she been Roman, he might have lived. Or even more painfully, had she been Mary, Yahweh's angels might have helped her escape. Who could believe in the God who had not come to her but had saved others instead?

And so here we have Rachel, a woman cut deeply by the ravages of sin. Tighter and tighter she wrings the cloth between her hands as she stands on the roadside, her eyes moving between the hilltop's dead and the fallen, weeping woman near her. She twists the cloth she once created, unable to even imagine a new creation. A new life? A new scarf that she might wrap around her for comfort and warmth? For beauty? She is unable to fathom the mere possibility of what it is she no longer has. Caught in sin, she cannot see sin. Broken by violence, she does not know the depths of the evil that still inhabits her body and soul.

Mary's Story: Blessing and Creativity

The story of Rachel illustrates how sin undoes us as creative beings who embody the glory of God. The story of Mary offers us the reminder and the hope that sin does not have the last word. As with Rachel, Mary's relationship to sin is complex. Though we know more about Mary than we know about Rachel, there is a great deal about Mary that we do not know and are forced to surmise. Since she was born into poverty, we traditionally imagine her as little more than a slave—a young girl who (being female) spends her hours and her days on menial tasks. Like Rachel, then, she is affected by the systemic sin that marginalizes her due to her gender and class. And this sin that is social is also private—as Rachel embodies the wounds inflicted by trauma, so Mary's person, life, and actions are shaped by the sinful social structures in which she is caught. She has not suffered the trauma that Rachel has suffered. But she has, no doubt, been socialized not to think very highly of herself. She averts her eyes, leaves the speaking to others, and endeavors

to serve the men. Certainly she would never think of herself as a prophetess, the bearer of the One who would save.

And yet somehow she comes to understand herself differently. Mary—a peasant girl—is called “blessed” by God. Even more incredibly, she eventually recognizes and lives into the reality of her blessedness, contributing to the very work of God. Mary’s story gives us the hope that while social sin has a detrimental impact on our embodied existence as creative agents, it need not, finally, determine who we are, how we understand ourselves, or what we do with our lives. Mary demonstrates that recognizing our identity as sinners can, in fact, simultaneously precipitate our acting in creative and transformative ways.

Informing our reflections on Mary, in these regards, are feminist studies on the subject of “feminine sin” (a term first coined by Saiving). Historically and sociologically speaking, “feminine sin” is the sin that women are most apt to be guilty of in the context of being marginalized by sinful power structures. Given the message that they are second-rate citizens who do not have the capacity to shape or influence culture as agents, women too often “buy into” the message conveyed to them by way of these sinful systems, making these false assumptions their own. Women, then, are often not assertive enough precisely because they have become the passive creatures they were taught to be. They might not act enough, or forcefully enough, because they have accepted that they are incapable and weak. They are frequently too hard on themselves, do not think highly enough of themselves, or are unable to perceive themselves in relation to the events that surround them.

How is it that women can move from being trapped not only by the sinful structures themselves but by their own “buying into” these sinful structures by way of their feminine sin? How can “living into their identity as sinners”—that is, recognizing the role they play in these systems—actually *propel* creativity on the part of women? To address these questions, we return to the story of Mary.

We imagine Mary, going out to scrub the laundry in a nearby stream, being visited by an angel who tells her that she is “favored” and that the Lord is with her. Mary is immediately “perplexed, and for good reason.”⁷ What could an angel want with her, a poor girl with nothing to offer? And so she “wonders what kind of greeting this might be” (Luke 1:29). With women who, through the ages, have not recognized their value, Mary is looking over her shoulder to see who else Gabriel

⁷ “Perplexed” is the word given in the New Revised Standard translation of Luke 1:29.

must be talking to. But the message, and the fact that it is being addressed to her, becomes only more difficult to fathom. Mary will bear a son, and he will be named Jesus. “Of his kingdom there will be no end,” Gabriel declares to Mary.

“How can this be,” Mary naturally asks, “since I am a virgin?” Gabriel doesn’t argue with her. He doesn’t try to convince her of her capabilities and potentials. Instead, he reminds her that “nothing is impossible with God.”

“Let it be unto me as you have said,” Mary responds. “Behold, I am the Lord’s handmaiden.”

We imagine that Mary emerges from that encounter a changed woman. She is pregnant with new life; she begins making traveling plans; she begins, with great fury, to write poetry about how God has liberated her, fed her, included her. She envisions a new world in which sinful power structures have been overturned. And she who was voiceless lifts high her eyes, fills her lungs tight with air, and opens her mouth to proclaim this great, redeeming reversal.

What has gotten into Mary?

First, let’s look at her sense of *agency*. What is it that moves Mary from a posture of self-effacement to the position of an agent, creatively participating in and proclaiming the coming of God’s reign? Our first response to this question might be the visit of the angel. It would be easy to assume that anyone who has an emissary of God pay them a visit and assign them an important mission would have great incentive to act. And yet Gabriel’s first words to Mary do not provoke action but a profound sense of inadequacy. “How can this be?” Mary asks. In and of herself, she knows she is incapable of bearing God.

Interestingly, at this point we do not know whether Mary’s declaration of her incapacity is a manifestation of feminine sin or an exercise of self-awareness. Is Mary buying into the systemic presumption that a young woman has nothing to contribute? Or is she accurately assessing her abilities and resources in the face of the news set before her? We suggest that both of these might be in play. There is a sense in which, ironically, Mary’s position as a marginalized figure in the social system makes her more open to acknowledging the incapacities that come with being a virgin.

We propose that it is precisely Mary’s recognition of her incapacity to create, in and of herself, which positions her to do the impossible. Mary’s response reminds us, at this point, of the Reformed doctrine of “total depravity”—a doctrine that, too often, has been used to impede agency rather

than to foster it. The story of Mary illustrates what happens when we understand this doctrine not as disparaging human beings but as recognizing the condition they find themselves in. As Paul Lehmann put it, the doctrine of total depravity “simply expresses the fact that whatever it takes to overcome the ethical predicament of humanity does not lie within the powers of humanity.” Rather, Lehmann insists, “Human renewal . . . comes to humanity as a gift.”⁸ Mary seems to understand this. Whatever it takes to bear the child she is called to bear does not lie within her power. She knows her virginity, her depravity. And this recognition—this recognition of her sinful condition—prepares her for receipt of the gift of renewal.

One mark of Mary’s renewal as an agent is her changing sense of *time*. Understanding her depravity, Mary is reminded by Gabriel that, though engaging this creative work of bearing Jesus is impossible, God has made what is impossible possible. Things are not as they seem, for God is at work in history, subverting and reversing that which is right before our eyes. As Mary will soon articulate, the impossible things God does are done for us and with us, creatively replacing those paradigms that we have presumed are the only possibilities. “God has filled the hungry with good things,” Mary will proclaim. “The rich God has sent away empty.” Knowing her depravity, being reminded of the power of God, Mary is suddenly not stuck indefinitely in the present, having no reason to believe that there is anything beyond the tasks she does today, which she will repeat tomorrow. Mary can now see a future, a future that lays claim to her in the present, a future that includes her as an agent of transformation. Mary’s belief in a transcendent God, far from entrenching her in her own sense of depravity and incapacitation, frees her to remember the past, envision the future, and act in the present.

As a creative agent in relation to the incarnational event, Mary claims *permission* to be someone she has not been socialized to be; someone who is not a victim in relationship to the systems that claim her but who, rather, contributes integrally to the shaping of a new world. This permission that she takes hold of, we like to imagine, lies at the interface of her recognition that she is incapable of this creative task, in and of herself, and her recognition that she can do the impossible, for God has made it possible. Luther famously told Christian believers that they should “sin boldly” and “love God more boldly still.” Mary—a sinner in love—claims permission for behavior that is otherwise impermissible.⁹ To give birth as a virgin? To go on a journey on

⁸ Paul Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 322.

⁹ Another example of a biblical figure who does this is that of the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus with expensive perfume (see Mark 14:3–9, Matthew 26:6–13).

her own? To speak prophetically? Freed from the pressure to be perfect, Mary steps forward and engages in these audacious, creative acts. She does what she can not do and is simultaneously called to do.

As an emerging agent who sees the future moving into the present, Mary claims permission to have a *voice* in a culture that understands her as (and no doubt trained her to be) voiceless.¹⁰ The sins of sexism and classism do not, ultimately, keep Mary from being “somebody with something to say.” Importantly, Mary’s finding of voice does not entail a sheer overpowering of everything that stands in her way. Rather, Mary’s voice emerges in the context of what feminist theologians call *naming*, or what traditional Christian theology calls *confession*. In short, Mary identifies the situation for what it is, in all its complexity. She teaches us the power of confessing not only our personal sin but also sin perpetrated against us.¹¹ She herself is sinful, she has been victimized by sin, and she has been blessed by God. Mary finds her voice as she faces up to and celebrates who she is in relation to the events and circumstances of her life. Because she owns up to who she is, she is able not only to imagine a different future, but to envision her place in it. “Many generations will call me blessed,” she insists, recognizing the role she is playing, in the present moment, as a creative agent.

Mary’s story reminds us, finally, of what it looks like to live into our *vocation* as creatures created and being recreated by our Creator God to be creative ourselves. She knows that her contribution to the divine enterprise is not contingent on how much energy she can muster, despite the obstacles she faces due to personal and social sin. Rather, Mary’s creative engagement in the incarnational event is founded in God’s claim on her as an integral participant in the divine artistry.¹² She is, to speak in the terms of Dorothee Sölle, an “irreplaceable” agent whose work is valued not because it has been assessed and deemed worthy of inclusion, but because Mary herself is claimed and included for who she is.¹³ As one who is blessed and lives in recognition of her blessedness, Mary embodies the glory of the God whom she also bears

¹⁰ For more on the social position of women in New Testament times, see Joachim Jeremias, “The Social Position of Women,” in *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 359–76.

¹¹ Examples of this abound in scripture, particularly in the Psalms. Consider how the psalmist in Psalm 51, for example, is freed to creatively exercise his agency by way of his confession of personal sin. In Psalm 22, the psalmist is literally freed from being a victim in relationship to her circumstances by naming them before God.

¹² For more on this point, see Cynthia L. Rigby’s “Mary and the Artistry of God,” in *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 145–58.

¹³ For more on this point, see Dorothee Sölle, *Christ the Representative: An Essay in Theology after the “Death of God”* (London: SCM Press, 1967).

to the world. Imagining the shape of God's Kingdom, she steps forward and speaks poetic, prophetic words that are absolutely—also—hers.

Meeting Grace, Graced Meetings

What dramatically different stories we have of these two women, both of whom struggle with what it means to embody the glory of God through their creative activity. For Rachel, a woman undone by sins that befall her, the possibility of creativity seems a distant dream, a promise beyond her reach. For Mary, a woman with intimate certainty that she is blessed, the possibility of embodying the glory of God seems already an accomplished fact (though one that will soon be sharply challenged by the grief she experiences in relation to the suffering of her son). The first gives us sobering pause, the second, honest optimism. The first speaks to those places in all of us where harm has banished hope, the second, those sites where sparks of creativity continue to ignite and inspire even in the midst of pain and loss—two very different worlds of imagination, two very different spirits of possibility.

In closing, we want to return to that roadside on Golgotha and explore what might have happened had the women met. If words had passed between them, what would they have said, speaking out of their different grief? If speech had not come, what might their glances have expressed about their hopes and fears as they stood in the shadow of the cross? What might the sheer presence of the one have offered to the other, wanted or not?

Rachel to Mary

What does Mary learn from Rachel? What can a person who has been so blessed possibly learn from one who has never glimpsed the reality in which sin does not have the final word? Mary has spent thirty years pondering her inclusion in the work of God; Rachel barely has the resources to recognize her violation. Perhaps Mary resists identifying with this broken woman she meets on Golgotha. Perhaps on some level she is petrified that the fraction of joy she has managed to salvage will be rendered obsolete by the dull gaze of the woman. Surely, the two cannot have much in common. One's son has died a boy; the other will die a man, and this makes a difference. Mary has known, with her son, the joining of souls as well as the sharing of her breast. Together they have pondered the story of his birth and the mystery of his powers. True, the distance between them has grown during three years of ministry. But on the rare occasions when their eyes meet, she still knows that she has done the work of God in bearing him, raising him, and directing him to be—like her—a servant.

In her better moments, Mary still believes that somehow, in some way, God will use her son to save her people from their sins. Embracing Rachel as a fellow sufferer would surely jeopardize all this. To acknowledge the penetrating impact of sin, especially in relationship to this one who came to save, would be to cast unbearable doubt on the promise of salvation. To know the insidious connection between the death of one and the life of the other—that Rachel's son was killed in a search for Mary's son, who was spared—would surely join the two women (or drive them apart) in ways too intimate to be risked. Better to stay silent, to nod politely, and to continue traveling the long, endless road alone. Better to keep one's hopes intact, however small.

But perhaps Mary is still strong enough to risk learning from Rachel, to be reminded, again, that not all the hungry have yet been filled with good things. That those who abuse their power are, still, all too present—killing myriads of children, indiscriminately, for the sake of their advancing themselves. Rachel's story teaches Mary that the reversal to which the Magnificat bears witness is not the reality of everyday existence in a fallen, sinful world. Though Mary's prophecy that sin is not enduring may be true, so is Rachel's observation, made by way of her persistent presence that sin endures.

The fact is that the hope to which Mary clings is far more endangered by Mary's resistance to what Rachel has to teach her than by her wary embrace of it. If Mary does not learn from Rachel, her creative engagement as an agent who can imagine a different future runs the risk of being mere fantasy. If Mary does not listen to Rachel, her bold proclamation that sin is not the end of the story becomes mere denial rather than relevant hope. Her creative words would, then, be antithetical to the good, for their goal would be to escape reality rather than to recognize what is beautiful in real-life creaturely existence. Rachel reminds Mary that the power of embodying the glory of God lies not in simply transcending circumstances or surviving grief. As Mary has known, periodically, in her life, but as Rachel teaches her again: God's glory is known incarnationally, in the depths of the womb, at the point of connection with the most unlikely of all.

In embracing Rachel, Mary learns that one cannot have great hope without simultaneously bearing great grief. If one is a true poet, one will not be content with simply imagining more beautiful worlds. One will yearn for these worlds to become actualities. As poet and prophetess, Mary must, then, learn again from Rachel about the brokenness of the created order that can, from the perspective of the Magnificat, only be named and mourned. From the context of this imagined world, a prophetic word of condemnation is uttered: *two-year-old children should never be killed*. This brokenness—this sin that surrounds us and lures us into complacency—will never do. It is only as

we confess it that healing becomes a possibility. Creative imaginings then become vehicles of this healing rather than perpetuators of pain.

In our grief as well as in our hope we embody the glory of God, for our grief bears witness to what *should not be* and therefore to what *actually is* and *should be*, according to God's creative and redemptive intentions. This is what Rachel teaches Mary, as we imagine their encounter. And we believe Mary is then able to claim her own grief as a symbol of hope, a defiance of sin, an impetus for acting creatively toward the imagined future that has laid claim to her. With the help of Rachel, Mary moves toward the cross with no neutrality in relation to her circumstances. She is a mother, about to watch her son suffer and die. And this should not be.

Mary to Rachel

What does Rachel learn from Mary? What gift of insight might the mother of Jesus have given to this broken soul? Alas, the answer to this question is difficult to fathom, given that the most realistic response is more tragic than inspiring. It may be that although Mary has gifts of wisdom abounding, Rachel cannot receive them. The harsh truth of our world is that many, many of the traumas we suffer are never healed or even identified. Perhaps Rachel never returns to her loom, perhaps the events of that afternoon on Golgotha will disappear from her mind like so many other memories . . . and her shawl will simply wear thin and finally shred into nothing. It is a likely scenario.

But perhaps it is different. Maybe something new happens there. Maybe, standing there, Rachel is able to catch a glimpse of grace, a fleeting hint of redemption, a sense of the hope that long ago faded. If this is what happens, let us ask, what might it look like to her, this grace that saves, this knowledge of sin that reconciles and opens up creativity, this love that might allow God's glory to shine in her? What kind of grace is capable of meeting her loss?

In the Reformed tradition, we often refer to two features of God's grace. First, grace comes to us as a free gift; we cannot earn or even imagine its reality before it descends upon us in the fullness of mercy. Described as *preventive grace*, this grace breaks upon us from the outside, disrupting our expected habits of thought and our most accepted forms of heart. Second, grace comes to us in a manner that does not violate our form but rather cooperates with our capacities, enlarging our imaginations, and expanding the borders of our usual actions. Described as *enhancing grace*, it is a power that moves deep within our being, sharing our plight, conforming to our reality, and, in that identification, opening up new avenues of experience and hope. In both ways, grace bears the double mark of being at once a new,

freely bestowed, externally composed gift and a deeply familiar, intimately known presence—a grace both foreign and indigenous to us.

When Rachel looks up the hill to the cross that afternoon, what if this *enhancing, preventient* grace is somehow communicated to her? In his gaze, returning hers, he beholds her and she is beheld. Let us begin with the enhancing character of grace. Perhaps she is able to see in Jesus a form similar to hers. Cruciformed, he embodies the fractured, tortured shape of her traumatic existence. When she sees herself in him, there is an identification of being that makes communication possible. There is a familiarity of form that allows him to be as close to her as she is to herself. He wears not only her ragged cloth but also her confused mind and lost memory. Her invisibility is invisible in him. Invisible, that is, until he gives public testimony to her private wounds. “Who is my mother?” he mouths. “My son, my son,” she echoes into the blankness of her past.

But the form he shares with her is different from hers in his particular embodiment of it—and herein lies the expanding quality of its enhancement. Not only does she see herself in him; something more unfolds as her gaze falls upon him. Imagine with us that, if only for a brief moment, there in the midst of his dying, his gaze, in return, falls on her, and as their eyes meet, she sees him seeing her. She is seen by him. He witnesses her; he receives her unraveled testimony-of-a-life as an offering of truth, and in that exchange, he articulates her unspoken history, her invisibility made visible in his eyes. In this play of visions, the reality of enhancing grace opens before us. He assumes her reality, speaks the unspeakable in his own loss of speech, and then returns all of this to her as he witnesses to what she believed would be forever unknown. Perhaps, in that moment, she remembers. Perhaps she does not but instead is able, for the first time, to accept the blank of history as her truth.

And still there is more, a plentitude of exchanges in this unfolding meeting of grace. Not only is there perfect unity of form between them, but in the space of their shared trauma, he offers her something new—an advent, of sorts. Here, preventient grace breaks upon her. Wherein lies the difference that marks his preventient offering as more than a comforting solidarity and a conformation of knowing, enhancing presence? In some unfathomable motion of form, he shows forth glory in the very moment—his dying—that the loss of divine beauty seems most complete. He bears the image and presence of grace—he somehow shines—in ways that Rachel, in her ragged cloth, seems incapable of consciously embodying in herself.

Wherein lies his glory? Is it in his awareness of God’s presence to him in the midst of his suffering? Does his glory lie in his knowledge of its reality?

Perhaps, but for Rachel this seems insufficient, for it is precisely her own capacity to know that has been so profoundly ruptured by sin. If his salvation of her rests in his knowledge, then he can only save her because he knows so differently from the way she does. Where would the solidarity and identity be here? If this is not the source of his glory, could it then be in the singular unity of his will with the Divine, his obedience unto death? There is also a problem here—for Rachel, at least. Her own agential identity has come undone. If he saves through his will, then again, he redeems her only in that moment where in his assertion of agential humanity, he is distinguished from and not identified with her. If this is the case, then the mirroring ceases, and it appears that to bear the glory of God, he must leave behind her traumatic world. Where, then, do we find that dimension of grace that conforms without violating and that embraces without threatening? Where do we find Jesus' glory if not in knowledge or in action?

Perhaps it is somehow in the form itself, its beauty, the material embodiment of God in his crucifixion; perhaps this is, to her, the shape of salvation. Not just any beauty: It is the beauty of love, the form of beatitude that she sees in him. The traumatic violence he undergoes does not annihilate the form of his loving, although he bears within himself the full weight of the terror she knows. What is the form of love? It has no corollary, no mimetic twin. It simply is the truth of that moment, in all its inexhaustible particularity. And the good news it reveals to her and, yes, to us is that even if she never knows or acts as the creative, glorifying woman she was created to be, her glory shines nonetheless. It shines in the inexhaustible and brilliant particularity of her existence, in all its horrifying, lost details. That glory is simply the truth of her life. What could be more unexpected, more unmerited, than the sturdy reality that in God, she is loved; she is glorified and glorifies. Her hands need not weave rich cloth, her future need not depend on past memories she will never reclaim; her acceptance by God—God's trust in her—transcends and thus renders impotent her nonexistent trust in others.

It may seem an unsatisfactory answer to the challenge of her sin, the sin that haunts her every breath. Is it sufficient for us to live in the space of a grace that loves in the fullness of form and not in some contorted notion of our agency and our noetic strengths of mind? Maybe not. But maybe.

Imagine with us, if you will, that in the moment when Jesus' form bears such glory, and she glories in his glory, between her fingers she pulls on the threads of her former craft and feels again the possibility of unburdened creativity, a creativity upon which nothing hangs but her pleasure, and his. As she pulls the strand more tightly, she moves toward Mary, the Magnificat

now humming in the whisper of air that blows through her ragged shawl, not through Mary's youthful heart. The poetic genre of Mary's words becomes in its shape the genre that best announces Rachel's emerging voice—a broken form holding a hallowed truth, the aesthetics of grace. This fractured speech from Ramah is now what the grieving mother of Golgotha awaits to hear. And in this strange communication, there in the heat of the afternoon sun, glory shines.

Wreaking Weakness: A Cultural Studies Reading of the Lamb in the Apocalypse

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REVELATION OBSCURES. That is not, of course, John's intent. He seems to think he has cleared everything up. He is at his explanatory best in the opening three chapters. After capturing the imagination of his listeners with chapter 1's thrilling exposé of Jesus' cosmic power and eternal majesty, he turns to the mundane affairs of his all too fallible seven churches (Rev. 2:1–3:22). A master motivator, he uses his images of the powerful and ever present Christ to ratchet up feelings of devotion and obedience. His ethical mandates and pastoral castigations draw their strength from the carefully drawn revelation that Jesus is, always has been, and always will be Lord. His hearers and readers are to follow the ways of that Lord, witness to the rule of that Lord, suffer and die for the glory of that Lord, and believe in the imminent coming of that Lord to right the wrongs of history and vindicate the people who have suffered so tragically because of them. Above all, as the Lord's representatives, they are to initiate his victory by living out a witness of active and aggressive resistance against any power, human or supernatural, that would contest his Lordship by establishing and promoting its own.

But it is just here, at the point where he should be his most clear, that the seer starts seeing inconceivable things. From chapter 4 on, he ushers us into the heavens and reveals a barrage of otherworldly images that are supposed to have a decidedly this-worldly instructional impact. Impact to precisely what end, it is difficult to say. Stunned by the visual onslaught, centuries of interpreters have squinted through John's dark looking glass in an often futile effort to determine exactly what revelation this Apocalypse really reveals. Instead of clarifying, this Revelation obscures.

Fortunately for us, culture reveals. By enveloping an object of interpretation the way a carefully selected frame surrounds and thereby shapes the reading of the portrait it holds, culture contributes to meaning even as, and precisely because, it supplies context.¹ The revelation here is that the cultural context of

¹ Brian K. Blount, *Cultural Interpretation: Reorienting New Testament Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Brian K. Blount, "If You Get MY Meaning: Introducing Cultural Exegesis," in *Exegese und Theoriediskussion*, ed. Stefan Alkier and Ralph Brucker

the interpreter plays a powerful role in shaping the meaning that interpreter builds from his or her interaction with a text like John's Apocalypse.

Language is the foundation of every text. Language is potential. Language creates choice. It provides both the persons who draft it and those who subsequently encounter it with the opportunity to decode its audible sounds and visible markers. Words, for example, do not convey meaning; they convey meaning potential. That potential, that opportunity for choice, becomes *meaningful* only when it is performed and accessed in a certain context. One might consider the example "head." Clearly polyvalent, it could refer as easily to the leader of some organization or group as to the body part occupying the space between your shoulders. In some colloquial settings it could even be paired synonymously with as unlikely a partner as "bean" or "noggin." A sailor in search of a particular kind of relief might access it in a totally different manner still. In such a way, the single word attracts many different, but still "correct" decoding choices. The "meaningful" choice depends on the context.

If words are by themselves this polyvalent, one can imagine that the potential for meaning will increase exponentially as we collect words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and paragraphs into entire texts. The boundaries of choice widen even further in poetic texts where an author *intends* that his or her words accommodate a high degree of symbolic elasticity. The language of apocalyptic, John's language in Revelation, is consciously poetic. Symbolic to the core, it invites choice at almost every linguistic turn.² The cultural space one occupies will therefore be a critical factor in determining how and what that language *means*.

No doubt this is why critical interpreters have routinely anchored their readings of the Apocalypse in the presumed first-century cultural context of John and his first hearers/readers. The presumption is clear: John's writing context will clarify John's writing intent. There are two problems. First, scholars do not *discover* John's culture. They reconstruct it. That reconstruction operates from historical and literary clues. John has embedded some of the most important of those clues in his writing. For example, he locates his churches in Asia Minor at a time when believers in the Lordship of Jesus Christ are subject to varying forms of social and political hostility from those

(Tübingen and Basel: Francke-Verlag, 1998), 77–97; Brian K. Blount, *Go Preach! Mark's Kingdom Message and the Black Church Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998); Brian K. Blount, "Reading Revelation Today: Witness as Active Resistance," *Interpretation* 54 (2000): 398–412.

² M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 54; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 185.

who represent the power, lordship, and influence of Rome. Such clues, however, are suggestive, not determinative. It is no wonder then that there has been considerable debate over John's *actual* historical circumstance. Was there a widespread pogrom against Christians, or was the hostility, while often deadly, sporadic and specifically targeted? Was Domitian the emperor of record? Or was John's Babylonian beast steered by some other shepherd? When even answers to such elementary questions are open to debate, it is clear that while the historical and literary clues offer meaning potential, they do not provide meaning, in the form of objective, historical fact. Historians and exegetes use that potential in their reconstructive efforts. They access that potential through the lens of their own historical, social, political, and religious cultural contexts. The end result? The context into which researchers situate and thereby shape their interpretation of John's Revelation is rigged as much by the presumptions of their own cultural locations as by any alleged historical *facts*.

The second problem derives from the first. Historical critical researchers presumed that the past meaning they divined from a careful consideration of John's Revelation in light of John's *historical* context would be the one objective meaning that was stable and therefore meaningful for every reader in every place and time. Ironically, this quest for the past meaning obscured the fact that different interpreters from different contemporary contexts were reading the literary and contextual signals differently. Even when historical critical interpreters were fortunate enough to come to some consensus about John's *historical* context, they still found different and often opposing *objective* meanings.³ Why? Culture. Not John's culture. The culture of the Johannine interpreter.

Culture reveals. Revelation *seen* (the Revelation we see) is always Revelation *read* (the Revelation we read) through a particular cultural lens. It is therefore the Revelation of and for a particular, *present* culture. If that is indeed the case, if, whether we want it to or not, culture plays a key role in the revelatory process, why not do a cultural studies reading of Revelation? Instead of clinging to a fruitless search for a universal, objective interpretation whose one counsel pretends to fit everyone in every conceivable context, why not deploy a cultural studies model that can clarify Revelation's meaning for *us*?⁴

³ See, for example, the discussion on contemporary historical critical views of the Apocalypse in Arthur Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse: A History of the Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), especially 125–39.

⁴ Stephen D. Moore, "Introduction," *Semeia* 82 (1998): viii. "What, then, does cultural studies have to offer biblical studies? What else but a means of critically reading the Bible in its present contexts."

No matter what legion of investigative methods are deployed, in the end a clear Revelation is always *our* Revelation. When we try to make someone else's Revelation *our* Revelation, that effort obscures and mystifies; it speaks to and for their culture, not ours. No wonder, then, that it so often ends up sounding like so much mythological mumbo jumbo. This is precisely why the historical critical, literary critical, or any critical attempt to locate the Apocalypse in its first-century context and then to divine *the* universal, objective meaning for the book out of that context is an abortive enterprise from the start. Even if an interpreter is so fortunate as to reconstruct John's first-century context with sharp historical accuracy, and is subsequently skilled enough to use some methodological apparatus to inoculate himself from his own cultural predispositions and influences, his objective, accurate reading of Revelation will still be obscure. It would not make sense to a twenty-first-century reader precisely because its sense would be permanently lodged in the cultural confines of the last decade of the first century (or whatever decade and century that proficient interpreter finally determined was the work's accurate date). That fortunate interpreter would find himself in possession of an interpretive fossil *from* some dead community in the past, not an instructive meaning *for* some particular living community in the present.

But that is, dare I say it, *good news*. A cultural studies approach to Revelation clarifies what is otherwise obscure and makes what is otherwise incomprehensible meaningful because it operates with a conscious degree of particularity. Culture reveals, specifically. A cultural reading reveals the meaning of Revelation for those who share its contextual dynamics. In other words, a cultural reading reveals what Revelation means *for us*. That does not mean that readers in other cultural contexts cannot find our conclusions helpful. A cultural reading of the Apocalypse not only brings new light to *our* understanding of Revelation; it does so in a way that appreciates how different communal groups draw their own culturally derived meanings and conclusions. It subsequently fosters communication between us and them.

Readers learn more about Revelation when they listen to what people from other cultures have to say about the way Revelation reveals itself through the lens of their cultural encounter with it. This is the paradox: global comprehension of the book occurs only when readers surrender the quixotic quest for *the* one objective meaning that overrides all cultural limitations. Instead of immediately rejecting another culture's reading of the book as a corrupted, self-interested, and therefore biased *eisegesis*, the cultural reader recognizes that the only way to expand meaning is to value the fact that readers in different cultures will access meaning potential in ways that, while different, may well be no less worthy, no less *meaningful*.

This is *how* culture reveals. It is also *why* I want to pursue a cultural studies reading of Revelation. Given what I have just said, I obviously cannot do that by myself. I can only participate in what is by definition a communal process. I start by reading Revelation from my own cultural location. The meaning I create, I will subsequently share and revise through my collaboration with cultural Others. My research, then, does not intend to deliver the interpretive answer about any particular meaning facet of Revelation; it expects instead to initiate and benefit from an intercultural conversation.

By way of example, for my part in that conversation, I propose to use the cultural studies model to study Revelation's Lamb imagery through the lens of African American culture. I intend that reading to be another point of access into the meaning potential of the Apocalypse. I entitle that reading:

Wreaking Weakness: The Way of the Lamb

John's visionary thesis is that God shot Satan out of the sky and even now tracks him across the human, historical landscape in the crosshairs of the ultimate weapon, the slaughtered remains of his own son. Seeking refuge behind the impersonation of a bestial Roman empire, the draconian devil believes it has found a way to return fire against God by establishing on earth the lordship it could not claim in heaven. The power of countless legions at its back, the partnership of all the kings of the earth by its side, the wealth of the world's economy in its pocket, the rearmed adversary has ignited a conflict it is certain it has all the necessary strength to win.

God comes forward weakly. A dedicated child whom God had apparently sacrificed to God's war effort and has ghoulishly revived in the form of a defenseless, mangled Lamb goes out before his father on the point. A brood of unarmed, inexplicably impudent humans trails them from behind. When the battle engages, the satanic master of misdirection wheels around to the rear flank and goes after God's flock instead. If it can destroy them, it can destroy God's presence and God's dominance on earth. First, it has to draw them out. It dares God's people to declare their allegiance to God's son. When they do, it unleashes a deadly barrage of property theft, destruction of social standing, economic exploitation, and even execution. God fights back by exposing God's people in the same way that God had once exposed God's son. On the cross. Naked and defenseless. Like a Lamb led to the slaughter. And yet, unbelievably, God apparently believes this strategy will win the eternal day and transform human history into a reality where the dragon is dead and God dwells directly and securely with God's people. According to John, God's victorious way is the slaughtered way; it not only describes the path God's son took, it prescribes the path God's people *will take* on their way

to the new heaven and new earth their combative effort will help God create. They, too, are a vital part of God's arsenal; God will use their weakness the way the child David used a single one of his five smooth stones. To put the monster down.

I realize that all this battle imagery sounds a bit disconcerting. It is, however, John's imagery. For John, weakness is the silver bullet that God fires out like a dead-eye marksman against the scarcely exposed heart of cosmic and human evil. For John, weakness is a weapon. Jesus deployed it on the cross; Jesus' followers must now trigger it their lives. Notice how John draws the connections. First, especially early on when he is introducing the figure, John provocatively pairs "Lamb" with the adjective "slaughtered."⁵ The imagery brings to mind the *Tamid*, the ritual sacrifice that opened and ended the cultic day at the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus' death on the cross is likened through the use of this imagery to the *Tamid* lamb, its throat cut, its blood drained out, its carcass hung on a hook. One can not get much weaker than that.

But this is precisely when John makes an even more daring move. He aligns this startling snapshot of perennial shortcoming, the slaughtered Lamb, with what might well be the most complete symbol of utmost power, the heavenly throne. Of the eighteen combat-oriented circumstances where John uses lamb, nine (fifty percent) of them occur either with or in direct proximity to God's throne.⁶ For John, literally speaking at least, "slaughtered" equals power.⁷ The complete formulation, "slaughtered lamb," operates for John the way parables operated for Jesus. It takes on qualities people expect, then it overturns them. All of a sudden, Jesus' status as victim morphs into that of victor. It is as if the Lamb, acting exactly the way one expects a Lamb to act, or, in this case, be acted upon, produces like a lion.

The Lamb as Suffering Sacrifice

In the typical Christian view, the slaughtered lamb is lit up like a blinking, neon sign that marks God's strategy as one of redemptive suffering and sacrifice. Jesus is, in other words, the quintessential martyr, the man who surrenders his innocent life so that others, even the guilty, may go free. In

⁵ Cf. 5:6, 8–9, 12; 13:8. See also connections to the blood of the lamb at 7:24; 12:11.

⁶ Cf. 5:6 (throne), 8 (throne context, v.9), 12 (at the throne), 13 (throne); 6:1, 16 (throne); 7:9 (throne), 10 (throne), 14 (at the throne), 17 (throne); 12:11; 13:8, 11; 14:1, 4, 10; 15:3; 17:14.

⁷ The term lamb, *ajrinivon*, occurs twenty-seven times in Revelation. On eleven occasions, it occurs with or in direct relationship to the throne. On nine occasions it occurs at or after 19:7 when the Lamb is victoriously described as the bridegroom of the new Jerusalem. The final two such occurrences, 22:1 and 22:3, occur in those victorious later chapters and are thus not figured into the combat scene equations.

this atonement-oriented reading of John's Apocalypse (cf. 1:5), Satan was owed his due for crimes God's people had committed against God and each other. Cosmic law was exact and unyielding; human sin warranted *capital* punishment. Someone had to pay: humankind or someone standing in its place. To save humanity, God chose the latter option. God paid the price by giving up God's son to Satan's legalistic demands, thereby breaking Satan's hold over humanity and setting it free. Jesus' death on the cross, mythically described by John at 12:5 as the snatching of a messianic son to the throne of heaven, erased the debt. That "snatching," though, is precisely the problem. In the end, God *cheats* death by reclaiming the son's life. Satan therefore loses both its claim over humanity and its divine kill. No longer able to accuse a graciously exonerated humankind of sinfulness, the adversary even loses its heavenly position. Thrown down, it is thrown out of cosmic power.

Infuriated, dragon-like in its form and method of operation, Satan now roams the earth directly engaging the humans it could only attack from a heavenly distance before. This time God enlists those who trust in the sacrifice of God's son to counterattack. God commands them to fight the way the son fought; his way will be their way. This is why it is crucial to determine precisely what that way is. If Jesus did accomplish his task by suffering and dying redemptively for others, his followers must suffer and die redemptively as well.⁸ The way of sacrificial slaughter will be their way of discipleship.

At first sight, there appears to be a happy correspondence between this traditional way of viewing Jesus as a slaughtered, sacrificed lamb and the suffering circumstance that surrounds the black church tradition in the United States. The appearance is deceptive. As JoAnne Marie Terrell points out, in introducing African slaves to Christianity American evangelicalism imposed a standard of piety that "urged slaves to imitate Christ substantively, through personal sacrifice as their bounden duty."⁹ Anthony Pinn agrees: In their "Christian" examination of the problem of suffering and evil, black slaves reached two primary conclusions. One: unmerited suffering is evil. However, it can have redemptive consequences. Two: God and humans are coworkers in the struggle to remove evil.¹⁰ The problem is that slaves came to believe through white teaching and their own internalization of white spirituality that *their* unmerited suffering was God's chosen tactic for effect-

⁸ Cf., David Aune, "Following the Lamb: Discipleship in the Apocalypse," in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 278. "The victory achieved by Jesus through suffering and death becomes a central paradigm for discipleship in the Apocalypse."

⁹ JoAnn Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood?: The Cross in the African American Experience* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 37.

¹⁰ Anthony B. Pinn, *Why, Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 15.

ing that removal. The end result was a spiritualization of Jesus' suffering and death which mandated that slaves similarly surrender their own lives for others. The role of the "others" was too often wickedly played by slave owners. The end result was a hermeneutic of sacrifice. It ignored the injustice of the slave condition; it praised instead the slave who, because of his or her love for the Lord, forfeited his or her entire life and work effort to the demands the slave condition imposed.¹¹

Terrell argues that this hermeneutic of sacrifice led to the de-radicalization of the black church in the period following Reconstruction and on into the Jim Crow era. The church was so desperately focused on spiritual salvation and the identification of its own struggles with the redemptive crucifixion of Christ that it either dismissed or accommodated itself and its communicants to the savagery of racist separatism and hate.¹² Properly understood, suffering was rehabilitative and redemptive; it shored up one's faith while it solicited God's salvific intervention. One ought therefore to endure it heroically, even thankfully. Pinn believes that the effect of this hermeneutic still drives the church today. How else to interpret the constant prayer refrains of suffering sisters and mothers in the AME churches that were foundational to him? "The words of Sunday morning prayers have stayed with me: 'Lord, you never said it would be easy . . . and so, if I'm going to wear a crown, I must bear my cross.' "¹³

The only problem, Pinn cautions, is that "bearing one's cross" never brings about the liberative transformation it promises. He writes: "I argue that the history of Black religious thought on suffering—Black 'theodicy'—makes clear the dominance and unacceptability of redemptive suffering arguments. These arguments are unacceptable because they counteract efforts at liberation by finding something of value in Black suffering. In essence such arguments go against social transformation activity. Redemptive suffering and liberation are diametrically opposed ideas; they suggest ways of being in the world that, in effect, nullify each other."¹⁴

What, then, does an African American Christian do with the slaughtered Lamb of the Apocalypse? Revelation intends social, political, and historical transformation; the oracle of the new heaven and a new earth testifies to that. Revelation also intends that human disciples in some way participate in the construction of this realization (12:11). But if suffering is always evil and

¹¹ Terrell, *Power in the Blood?*, 52. "Through brute force, paternalistic compromise and the hermeneutics of sacrifice, European Americans called upon African Americans to surrender their labor, their agency and, perhaps most critically, their identity."

¹² Terrell, *Power in the Blood?*, 75.

¹³ Pinn, *Why, Lord?*, 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

ultimately self-defeating, can the slaughtered Lamb remain a positive role-model image? Can a more sophisticated constituency of black church believers, who recognize a call to suffer for the deceptive and evil ruse that it is, find transformative hope in John's shockingly traumatic Christ symbol? What can a slaughtered lamb do for a perennially suffering people?

It is at this point that the work of New Testament interpreter, Loren Johns, becomes particularly helpful. Johns focuses exclusively on what he calls the rhetorical force of the Lamb symbolism in the Apocalypse. He asks a pertinent question: how, in their particular social-historical setting, will John's readers appropriate his Lamb language? After an exhaustive survey of lamb imagery in Early Judaism, he reaches the conclusion that "there is no evidence at this point to establish the existence of anything like a recognizable redeemer-lamb figure in [its] apocalyptic traditions."¹⁵ John would therefore not have expected his readers to connect his lamb's suffering/slaughter to their own redemption. *That* positive value for suffering is thus removed. A survey of the Hebrew Bible affords no better warrant. In a study that offers the most relevance for my particular concern about the redemptive efficacy of the Lamb's slaughter, Johns explicitly rules out a transformative suffering agenda. After comparing texts that discussed lambs used for sin atonement with the lamb language in Revelation, he concludes that "the terminology used in the Apocalypse does not fit well with the lambs of the sacrificial system."¹⁶ In fact, he points out appropriately that John does not even restrict slaughter language to the lamb (cf. 6:4, 9; 13:3; 18:24). His conclusion: "In none of these other cases is the 'slaughter' considered expiatory, reducing the possibility that the rhetorical force of the 'slaughter' of the Lamb in 5:6 is primarily expiatory."¹⁷ He then broadens his conclusion even further. He argues that "there is little in the Apocalypse of John to support this understanding of Jesus' death as Atonement."¹⁸ It is the Atonement that gives Jesus' suffering its positive value. According to Johns, in Revelation, no such positive connection between the Lamb and suffering is made.

John's resistant Lamb, though vulnerable, is hardly a sacrificial victim. Indeed, this presentation of the Lamb is exactly how it should be. According to Johns, "vulnerability *without* victimization seems precisely to be the sign of the eschaton: the passages that treat lambs as symbols in the visions of eschatological peace portray vulnerable lambs as safe in the presence of their

¹⁵ Loren Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2003), 106.

¹⁶ Ibid., 129.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 130.

traditional predators.”¹⁹ This *Lamb* is a conquering lion (5:5), armed with the fullness of God’s power (symbolized by the seven horns, 5:6), who deposes the dragon Satan (12:11), and, having taken up the sword of God’s word, rides out to meet Satan’s forces on the field of apocalyptic battle (2:16; 19:11–16). How is one to hold these opposite dramatizations of vulnerability and conquest together in a believable narrative tension? To help answer that question, I turn to the work of an interpreter of the black church tradition, Theophorus Smith.

The Lamb as Homeopathic Cure

Smith broadens the horizons of the black church tradition. He includes within its theoretical compass the phenomenon of African conjure that crossed the Atlantic with the slaves and syncretistically embedded itself within the traditions of African American Christianity. He is particularly intrigued by the conjure concept of the homeopathic cure. In effecting a “cure,” the conjuror takes an obvious negative and reconstitutes it into something positive and efficacious.²⁰

The conjuror creates an effective antidote by capturing a small dose of the disease, reprogramming it, and then turning it back on itself. In Smith’s words, “a mimetic form of a disease is prescribed to cure that disease.”²¹ Or, to work within the dragon characterization that John so ably employs, homeopathic cure is like stirring the milked venom of a poisonous snake into the bowl of ingredients that, when fully cooked, will neutralize the toxin injected by the serpent’s fangs. To use yet another of Smith’s illustrations, “In the signal case of immunization, the intention is to mimic the disease in a manner that skillfully engages the body’s natural defenses without allowing the disease a full range of operation.”²² African Americans have been as

¹⁹ Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 148.

²⁰ By way of example, Smith offers the name change of former slave Isabella Baumfree upon her release in 1827. When she gave herself the name Sojourner Truth she initiated an “existential transformation similar to that of the young Saul in 1 Samuel 10:6” (Theophorus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994], 164). Her effort was therapeutic; it remedied the perception that she was an inferior being owned by and therefore needing to be named by someone else. It was also homeopathic; “it mimicked the ‘diseased situation’ of racist cognitive perceptions, precisely in order to counter those perceptions and to cure that disease” (Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 168). Truth laid claim to the warped principles of African American naming whereby a slave owner conveyed identity with the issuance of a name, and reconfigured them. She took that prerogative upon herself. The new name conveyed a new purchase. For freedom. John is such a conjuror. Right before our disoriented eyes, he transfigures a slaughtered Lamb into a conquering Lion without surrendering either its homicide or its helplessness. It is a homeopathic act.

²¹ Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 226.

²² Ibid., 169.

skilled at applying this homeopathic principle to their social situation as physicians have been at applying it to their battles with biological dis-ease. Smith points to black music as a notable case in point: "the blues mode of transformation, in which one counteracts a melancholy mood by means of a melancholy tune, is homologous, or similar in function, to 'conjurational' practices which are homeopathic in nature."²³

In the Book of Revelation, John captures a dose of violence, the slaughter of the Lamb, and homeopathically reconfigures it into the *one* weapon capable of tearing violence apart. To be sure, it is a theological high-wire act of the trickiest sort. Using violence to conquer violence is an age-old, centuries-tested, recipe for failure. Violence, in no matter how small or how carefully apportioned a dosage, tends more toward replication than cure. Depending heavily upon the work of René Girard, Smith analyzes how some societies have attempted to solve this conundrum.²⁴ Leaders on opposing sides of a hostility attempt to contain an outbreak of all-out violence, where huge segments of a population or different populations square off against each other, by directing necessary blame for the conflict at a single individual or group of individuals. The scapegoat. Each side holds this scapegoat responsible for the outbreak of hostility. Because the scapegoat takes the blame, it must also pay the price. Theoretically, the violence unleashed against the scapegoat should appease the will to violence by either embattled side. This is how sacrifice works; it is a homeopathic attempt to use a small dose of violence, directed against some sacrificial victim, some scapegoat, either to preempt or conclude an episode of divine or human fury. It is how many Christians read the slaughtered, "sacrificial" Lamb of Revelation. The lamb was violently sacrificed upon the cross in order to appease Satan's desire for humanity's destruction and God's need for humanity's judgment. The lamb becomes the scapegoat. In this way of thinking, John calls upon the slaughtered lamb as a way of reminding his hearers and readers how God contained the destructive violence they deserved and then graciously accepted them. They were refined because somebody else, the Lamb, voluntarily went into *their* fire. Now, though, it is *their* turn. In order to complete the transformation, they must now become the sacrificial scapegoat; they must mimic their model. When sufficient violence had been brought against them (cf. 6:11), God would initiate the judgment that would destroy their enemies and transform their violent history into a tranquil new heaven and a peaceful new earth.

²³ *Ibid.*, 226.

²⁴ Cf. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) and *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

The problem with this very traditional reading of the Lamb and his followers is that, as Johns's work has pointed out, Revelation's language does not support a sacrificial, scapegoat interpretation of the slaughtered Lamb.²⁵ If the Lamb is not a sacrificial scapegoat, then surely neither are the hearers and readers whom John asks to be witnesses and followers of the Lamb. What, then, is the slaughtered Lamb? He is a dosage of violence that is not only quantitatively reconfigured into a lesser amount; he is also qualitatively transfigured into a different substance. In his characterization as slaughtered, nonviolence is extracted from violence and then set out as an antidote against it.

The starting point is Jesus' ministry. In presenting Jesus as the ultimate *martyr*, i.e., witness, John refers back to Jesus' ministry. Jesus engaged the rulers of his day; but he did so with his word. He did so nonviolently. Smith puts the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry into his own therapeutic language: "Over against a cure of violence which generates culture by-means-of-violence, the gospels aim to regenerate culture on the basis of a salvific will—the will to save or 'make well.' "²⁶ But is that the real background and foreground of the Apocalypse? Johns seems to think so: "The lamb is strong, but the exhibition of its strength is unconventional: its strength lies in its consistent, nonviolent resistance to evil—a resistance that led to its execution."²⁷ John himself mimics the Lamb's activity by also witnessing in a costly, but yet nonviolent way.

"Nonviolent?" some critics mutter. What about all the bloodletting that takes place throughout the book? It does not take much more than a surface reading to recognize that the Lamb is indeed noted for *being* slaughtered, not for slaughtering others. Even at 19:11–16, when John says that he judges and makes war, and thus rides out onto the battlefield in a robe dipped in blood, the Lamb never actually fights. Battle is never engaged. The blood on his robe is his own; he does, after all, still bear the residue of slaughter. His offensive weapon is a sharp sword, but it is clearly tied to his identity as the Word of God. He issues it sharply from his mouth (cf. 1:16; 2:16; 19:15); when it cuts, it does so cleanly against the contrary witness that Rome and Caesar are Lord. The sure implication is that the sword of Jesus' mouth is his cutting testimony of his own true Lordship. It represents oppositional witness, not violent combat.

²⁵ Cf. Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 201–2. "As demonstrated above, there is little in the Apocalypse of John to support an understanding of Jesus' death as 'sacrificial' in the substitutionary or penal sense."

²⁶ Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 199.

²⁷ Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 161.

It is because of this witness that the Lamb is slaughtered. *And yet, in John's conjured, symbolic universe, that slaughter does not make him a sacrificial victim.* There are several reasons why not. First, by presenting the slaughtered Lamb as still standing, John even conjures death. As Johns puts it, "Essential to a proper understanding of the book's rhetoric is the recognition that the lamb *has triumphed in his death and resurrection.*"²⁸ In the combat mythology of chapter 12, it is at the legendary point of presumable death on the cross that the Lamb is snatched away from the dragon's grip and installed at the seat of God's heavenly power. John seizes a small dosage of fatality and with it converts death into eternal, omnipotent life.

Second, this lamb is no innocent; he *earns* the slaughter that comes his way. To be sure, this is an odd thing to say. And yet it is an accurate representation of both John's Apocalypse and some of the key transformative moments in the history of the black church tradition. Smith offers the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., as a primary example. "This new feature of the King phenomenon was the crafting of homeopathic performances in which a sufficiently small instance of a social disorder is rendered efficacious for exposing and (thereby) countering that disorder."²⁹ By deploying a small amount of nonviolent resistance, King drew out the reactionary violence of racial injustice and transformed it. When a shocked United States and world population witnessed the horrible violence unleashed against the nonviolent protesters, the very Lamb-like wrath of their outrage rained down in the form of executive, legislative, judicial, and martial intervention and reform. One can say that the civil rights protesters who were beaten, water-hosed, bombed, threatened, tortured, and even killed were, like the lamb, slaughtered. But one would not properly call them victims, even if their victory did come at what were often tragic costs. At the very moment their oppressors executed their violence against them, the moment of their symbolic "slaughter," their battle was won.

King and the civil rights activists who followed him were witnesses to the equality of African Americans. In a hostile Jim Crow environment where segregation was backed up by the force of municipal and state law, they stood up and witnessed to a contrary truth. In that sense, they "earned" the retaliatory, reactionary response they received. Someone sitting in at a segregated lunch counter or defiantly plopping herself down in the front of a bus when she had been legally consigned to the back will "earn" the abuse she receives. Just as John "earned" his exile. Just as Antipas "earned" his death (2:14). Just as the Lamb "earned" his slaughter. Just as the followers of the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 213.

Lamb who dare to stand up and witness to a truth that contradicts the declared truth of municipal, state, and imperial power will “earn” theirs. These are not sacrificial victims; these are fully engaged, nonviolent, activist witnesses.

Consider King’s thoughts about his own suffering: “As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways that I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. . . . Recognizing the necessity for suffering I have tried to make of it a virtue. If only to save myself from bitterness, I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains.”³⁰ Clearly King attempts here to conjure suffering into a therapeutic cure. Recognizing the necessity of suffering, though, is not necessarily the same thing as valorizing it. What *is* the necessity of suffering for King? Really, there is none. Had he retreated from the cause, “just gone somewhere and sat down,” the suffering he endured would not only have been unnecessary, it would have disappeared. The suffering the civil rights activists endured was not necessary in the sense that it was divinely ordained; it was necessary in the sense that many powerful people and forces in the South so wanted to maintain segregation that they could be counted upon to use force against anyone acting to disrupt it. Suffering was not King’s goal in any case. He clarifies: “Suffering in itself is not redemptive nor is it ordained by God; rather, it is contrary to Christian principles of unity and proper behavior.”³¹ His goal was the transformation of an oppressive social situation. He was, however, willing to endure the suffering his activist behavior “earned,” in order to bring that transformation about. Undeserved, suffering is often well “earned.” Not in a sacrificial or redemptive sense, but in a transforming, conjuring one.

The third reason that John’s slaughtered Lamb is not a sacrificial victim is that his homeopathic cure is an intentional display of aggressive, one might even say, predatory power. Smith makes his point again using the civil rights ministry of King; the homeopathy of nonviolence is still a will-to-power. In fact, this is why he studies King. “I investigate King’s religious heritage for its power simultaneously to overturn ethnic victimization and to transform the victimizer—for its *power* to realize what he called ‘the beloved community.’”³² Pinn agrees. He recognizes how, particularly in King’s later years (a

³⁰ Quoted in Pinn, *Why, Lord?*, 76. From “Suffering and Faith,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Washington (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 41.

³¹ Quoted in Pinn, *Why, Lord?*, 76. In “Shattered Dreams,” Boston University King Collection, Box 119 a. XVI. 16, 10.

³² Smith, *Coujuring Culture*, 183. Italics mine.

point James Cone makes in more detail in *Martin and Malcolm and America*), King recognizes the importance of power in any transformational dynamic. "In later years (1962–68), King recognized that the inhumanity of white Americans toward Black Americans was more systemic than he initially realized. As a result, King shifted his emphasis away from love (and moral persuasion) as the counterbalance of dwarfed moral conscience to justice (and 'nonviolent coercion') as the demand of love. Hence, love had to be combined with acquired power and full participation in a reformed love."³³ King himself was quite specific: "power without love is reckless and abusive and . . . love without power is sentimental and anemic."³⁴

Could it be that this emphasis on the necessity of power is the reason why John finds it necessary, before he introduces Christ as the slaughtered Lamb, to announce him as a mighty Lion (5:5)? I think so. There is every narrative indication that John thinks the two titles belong together. In the end, neither subverts the other. The Lion reveals a Lamb; the Lamb remains a Lion. Patricia McDonald advises that John hints at his intention by the way he uses his language: "There is, on the whole, a distinction between what John sees and what he hears. As Sweet and others have noticed, hearing tends to give the inner reality of what is seen."³⁵ Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that John *bears* the moniker "lion," but *sees* a Lamb. Whenever the hearer or reader *sees* the Lamb in the remainder of the narrative, the staging of this character profile in chapter 5 suggests that he or she *bears* the footsteps of a lurking lion. Robert Mounce, after observing that John has retrofit this particular Lamb with the symbolism of perfect power (seven horns) and complete wisdom (seven eyes) agrees: "The *arnion* of Revelation is not a dramatic contrast to the figure of the Lion but an extension of the same powerful figure."³⁶ The slaughtered Lamb is a powerful conqueror (5:5, 6; 12:11; 17:14). And yet, there is something unique about this Lion/Lamb's *modus operandi*. McDonald notes: "Although [John's] lion of Judah 'conquers' . . . it does so not in a lion-like way, by tearing its prey to

³³ Pinn, *Why, Lord?*, 76–77.

³⁴ Quoted in Pinn, *Why, Lord?*, 77. See Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 37.

³⁵ Patricia M. McDonald, "Lion as Slain Lamb: On Reading Revelation Recursively," *Horizons* 23, no. 1 (1996): 33. See also Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 183. "Jesus Christ is the Lion of Judah and the Root of David, but John 'sees' him as the Lamb. Precisely by juxtaposing these contrasting images, John forges a symbol of conquest by sacrificial death, which is essentially a new symbol."

³⁶ Robert H. Mounce, "Worthy Is the Lamb," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation: Essays Presented to Everett F. Harrison by His Students and Colleagues in Honor of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford LaSor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 68.

pieces and devouring it, nor even in the military way that the imagery surely implies.”³⁷ It conquers through predatory weakness.

Does this kind of description hold? It did for King. An observer of his nonviolent, active, engaged, and acerbic resistance would not have been wrong to describe him as a “Lion” for justice and equality. Neither would be an observer of John’s slaughtered Lamb. Perhaps this is precisely why, after his initial introduction in chapter 5, John no longer feels it necessary to continue the lion language. The hearer or reader no longer needs it; he or she has the slaughtered Lamb, which is the appropriate narrative interpretation of the Lion. The slaughtered Lamb is *how* the lion manifests itself in the world. In other words, the predatory way of the lion *is* the slaughtered lamb. “Slaughtered Lamb,” then, is not so much a descriptive, static noun as it is a paradoxical, action verb. Though John’s lion is a powerful conqueror, it would not be right to say that this lion “bunts its prey.” The more appropriate language would be something like, “this lion *slaughtered Lambs (sLambs)* its prey.” This lion *slaughtered Lambs (sLambs)* the dragon and the beasts that historically represent it.³⁸ The weak lamb, then, does not subvert the powerful lion; the lamb’s weakness, its slaughter, is precisely the way the lion works out its power. The lion *sLambs* God’s opposition.

It does so on its own active, preemptive terms. Johns’s survey of the social historical situation of the Apocalypse reveals a tantalizing interpretative clue. In a reconstruction that represents today’s prevailing scholastic thinking, he argues that there was no wholesale persecution of Christians during the time when John was most likely writing, the time of Domitian’s reign (81–96 CE). The evidence suggests that John was writing more about the “*expectation* of persecution rather than the present *experience* of persecution.”³⁹ The problem lay with the imminent conflict he knew would erupt if his hearers and readers lived out the kind of non-accommodating Christianity that he himself professed. He was concerned primarily about the claims of Lordship declared by Rome and Caesar and the witness to those claims made in the local municipalities where his churches were located. Johns paints a historical picture of local leaders pitched in feverish competition to land the rights to build temples praising the divinity of the emperor and the lordship of Rome. In order to fit socially, politically, economically, and religiously in these communities, John’s followers would have to accommodate themselves to the

³⁷ McDonald, “Lion as Slain Lamb,” 37.

³⁸ Indeed, this lion also slaughtered Lambs God’s people. Jesus’ death on the cross, after all, is as much a judgment as it is a victory. That is a point John tries desperately to get across in his chapter 2 and 3 letters to his wavering churches.

³⁹ Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 122. Johns points to 2:10–11; 7:13–14; 11:7–9; 12:11; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4–6.

demands of these localized cultic affections. Resisting those demands would invite trouble.

Trouble, however, had apparently not *yet* arisen. That might well mean that John's believers were all too occupied in the business of accommodation. According to Johns, "the resistance called for was an *offensive* maneuver as John tried to unmask the spiritual powers at work behind the churches' compromising involvement in the empire, in its commerce, and in its imperial cult."⁴⁰ His concern that other Christian prophets, whom he calls Jezebel—the Nicolaitans, and Balaam—were approving of such behavior raised his hackles even further. John was unyielding; there could be no compromise with any activities that gave credence to the idea that Caesar, Rome, or Rome-sponsored divinities held title to the allegiance due only God and the Lamb.

But if all this is correct, if there was not yet any persecution, if John's people were not vulnerably standing out because they were finding ways comfortably to blend in and accommodate, then the seer's immediate problem was, as Johns points out, more spiritual than social and historical. The social-historical crisis would not arise *unless* John's people actually started to live by the mandates his apocalyptic prophecy demanded. Johns concludes: "the resolution of that spiritual crisis would ironically induce a very real and dangerous *social* crisis as the churches began faithfully to resist the imperial cult and to face the consequences of their allegiance to Christ."⁴¹

This recognition is precisely what makes Lamb-like behavior active, aggressive, and predatory even as it remains "weakly" nonviolent. If John was indeed asking his people to stand up and stand out in a world they had accepted and had accepted them, he was essentially telling them to go out and pick a fight! He was ordering them to go declare that they were now non-accommodating Christians who could no longer participate in a world that had not really noticed them since they had heretofore been accommodating to it. In a classic "don't ask, don't tell" (that I'm a Christian) kind of environment, John was essentially ordering his Christians to be about the business of telling on themselves, with full knowledge of the kind of repercussions such telling would bring. He was asking them to come screaming out of the Christian closet, knowing that it would solicit the same consequence it had attracted to the Lamb. Slaughter. However, as one can plainly see, slaughter was *not* the goal. The goal was an active ministry of resistance that would witness to the singular Lordship of Jesus Christ. The slaughtering would, ironically, just as Jesus' death led to his empowered life, help lead to

⁴⁰ Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 127.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

the transformative goal of eternal life in a new heaven and new earth where that Lordship was on full display (12:10–12). This is how the homeopathic cure works. For those who are slaughtered because they stand up for Christ and therefore cause themselves to stand out to Rome and its Asia Minor vassals, defeat is conjured to victory, oppression is conjured to liberation, death is conjured to life. Like death itself, the dragon and the imperial power that worships and represents it are *sLamed*.

Love God and Do What You Will

By JOHN M. BUCHANAN

John M. Buchanan is the Pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. He delivered this sermon in Miller Chapel on June 28, 2004 as part of the Joe Engle Institute of Preaching.

Psalm 23

1 Corinthians 12:4-13

IN THE INTRODUCTION to a wonderful biography, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*, author Walter Isaacson says that over the years Franklin, one of the most remarkable Americans, was guided by one question: “How does one live a life that is useful, virtuous, worthy, moral and spiritually meaningful?”¹ Franklin lived to be eighty-four and never stopped asking that question and never stopped living fully. I was particularly interested, of course, in Franklin’s views of religion and whether religion had anything to do with his remarkable life. He was brought up in a properly pious Puritan home in Boston and his father even hoped he might study theology and be a minister. But Franklin was uncomfortable with the theological certainty and the ethical legalism of the traditional churches. The most influential thinkers of the age were Deists: they accepted the existence of God, thought God should be recognized and worshipped, but concluded that all in all God didn’t have much to do with human life. Franklin became disenchanted with Deism also, and said, “I began to suspect that this doctrine, though it might be true, was not very useful” (46).

Franklin thought that religion should be useful. He found himself attracted to a Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, particularly by the lively preaching of a young assistant minister, Samuel Hemphill. Hemphill came from Ireland in 1734 and was a great preacher, drawing large crowds, including Franklin. However, he was a bit of a free thinker, a little more free than his Presbytery could abide and soon found himself in trouble. Franklin supported him and defended him against his accusers. But then it turned out that Hemphill was plagiarizing those lively sermons and soon left town. Franklin observed, “I rather approved his giving us good sermons composed by others, than bad ones of his own manufacture; the latter was the practice of our common teachers” (109). Franklin quit the Presbyterian congregation for good and although he continued to support the churches of Philadelphia and contributed his own money to all of them—including the first synagogue in 1788, he

¹ Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 4. Page numbers in the text refer to this book.

never joined a church again. But he did continue to believe that God was involved in the matter of his life and that he was accountable to God for how he lived his life. Near the end of the book Isaacson writes: “Franklin’s belief that he could best serve God by serving his fellow man may strike some as mundane, but it was in truth a worthy creed that he deeply believed and faithfully followed. He was remarkably versatile in his service. He devised legislatures and lightning rods, lotteries and lending libraries. He sought practical ways to make stoves less smoky and commonwealths less corrupt. He organized neighborhood constabularies and international alliances. He combined two types of lenses to create bifocals and two concepts of representation to foster the nation’s federal compromise” (492). Through it all, Franklin believed he was here on earth to serve God and that he could best do that by thoroughly devoting his prodigious energy and creativity and imagination to the common good, and even though his biographers don’t mention it, and academic historians wouldn’t touch it with a ten-foot pole, I think Franklin had a fairly sophisticated Reformed notion of vocation—and that maybe he got it from listening to Samuel Hemphill’s plagiarized Presbyterian sermons!

Auburn Seminary professor and New Testament scholar Walter Wink says that every human being has to answer two questions. The question for the first half of our lives, Wink says, is: “What is the meaning of my life?” The question for the second half of your life and mine is: “With the time I have left, how can I make a difference?” It is a matter of supreme importance to every one of us wherever we are on our chronological trajectory: at the beginning, still sorting things out, with four or five decades and infinite possibilities ahead of you, or in the middle, with commitments and patterns set but with years of opportunity still ahead, or approaching retirement, or already retired, but with plenty of time and potential and your health and energy and passion and therefore potential and possibility in your future.

What should we do? Or, to put it in a religious context, “What does God want me to do? What is God’s will or plan for my life? Does God have a plan for me? If so, why isn’t God a little more upfront about it, a little more forthcoming with hints and clues, if not an operating manual for my life?” It is the question of vocation, which we all know comes from a good Latin word meaning “to call.” In its original sense—a vocation is a call from God. In just two generations there has been a profound revolution in our culture around this issue. In my parents’ generation decisions and opportunities were few and limited. Young men graduated from high school and went to work for the Pennsylvania Railroad, got married, and their wives became homemakers. Life was structured around that stable pattern for centuries. Going to work

implied a life commitment, with some opportunity for advancement and promotion on a very limited basis, and the promise of a retirement after forty years. Within two generations that centuries-old pattern disappeared. The average American will have five or six different jobs in his or her lifetime, sometimes very different careers. Bankers quit and become farmers. Attorneys go back to graduate school and become teachers. Homemakers go to seminary and become ministers. Everybody seems to be looking for a new job. And early retirement leaves many people with good health, vigor, and decades with which to do something. The issue of vocation has become more critical than ever.

The subject came up in the early Christian church in the Greek city of Corinth about twenty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul carried on a lively correspondence with the Christians in Corinth—who were a contentious, assertive, and highly competitive bunch, not unlike twenty-first century Presbyterians. There was a huge argument going on in the Christian community in Corinth. The issue had to do with status and vocation. Who was more important than whom? Whose job in the community was most important, the preachers, the teachers, the people who visited the sick, prepared the meals, swept floors?

“There are many gifts,” Paul wrote to the Corinthians, and God gives them all. God needs them all. None is more important than any other. Each is important, critical in fact. As a matter of fact the church, the community, Paul goes on to say, is like a body, and each part performs the function it is best suited to perform. Embedded in one short paragraph in that two-thousand-year-old letter are two radical ideas. The first is that there is no caste system, no rank based on function. There are a variety of ways to serve God and be a Christian. No one way is more pleasing to God than the others. God needs good clergy—good preachers and pastors—but no more than God needs good musicians, housepainters, doctors, plumbers, schoolteachers, athletes, and homemakers.

There is a radical egalitarianism in the New Testament with its roots in Jesus’ own ministry in which he simply refused to acknowledge the political, economic, and religious caste system of his own society. What got him in consistent trouble with the privileged was his adamant refusal to play by their rules, to stay in bounds. He insisted on including all—inviting all to the table regardless of worldly condition, economic status, moral purity, or religious orthodoxy. All were welcome and, furthermore, if you aspired to influence and power within the community, his strong suggestion was that you go to the end of the table and become the servant of others.

It was too radical for them and it still is for many of his followers. Almost as soon as it could the early church discarded his radical egalitarianism—which said that the only real authority is servanthood, in favor of the prevailing political model—an empire, a hierarchy, with God-given authority granted to the emperor or king who rules over everybody else. And in a few short centuries Jesus' counterculture movement looked for all the world like every other power structure, with clear lines of top-down authority and all the accoutrements of empire—palaces, armies, real estate, and the secular power to enforce its will.

Once a year we Presbyterians do something that expresses our intent to remember Jesus' radical new social model based on equality and service. I think we forget how radical it is. We ordain lay people to office in the church. Ordination generally is the rite, or the sacrament in Roman Catholicism, that confers status and authority to clergy. In our tradition the same ordination is conferred on clergy and laity—to service in the church. Pity the poor Presbyterian minister who thinks he or she has a lot of authority and is in charge of the church, not to mention the lives of the church members. We don't think much about it, but there are plenty of symbols of our commitment to radical egalitarianism—in our liturgy—and architecture even. I learned that lesson the hard way. The first time I presided at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, it was on a hot summer Sunday morning in Williamsburg, Pennsylvania. The Presbytery that ordained me the Sunday before suggested that I might fill in down at Williamsburg, which was without a minister. It was communion Sunday; I had never done it before. It was a tiny church, maybe thirty people in the pews. And I made the mistake, when it came time for communion, to walk in front of the communion table with my back to the congregation for the prayers and the words of Institution—"This is my body . . . This is my blood." Afterward the clerk—by the way, we are so egalitarian we call our highest officer the clerk—the clerk of the Williamsburg Presbyterian Church, a rough farmer in a very tight blue serge suit said: "You did OK, but, sonny, never turn your back on a Presbyterian congregation. Never put yourself between the people and the Lord's Table. We want to see what you're doing up there."

The first radical idea is that there is no caste system here. The people are the church. The people are the ministers, John Calvin said. Their pastor is one they elect to preach the word to them and help them with the common ministry that belongs to them all. The second radical idea is that in God's economy there is no unemployment. Everyone has a job. God calls everyone, not just clergy. Everyone has a vocation. That comes as a surprise to many people. Somehow over the centuries we came to believe that God calls some

people to become clergy, ministers, priests, nuns. That's what it meant to "have a vocation," but God leaves everyone else on their own when it comes to making vocational decisions. It comes as news to many people that many ministers never heard a voice in the night or were struck by lightning or had a vision instructing them to go to seminary. It comes as news that clergy struggle with vocational decisions as much as anybody else. But Paul said: "To each is given the spirit for the common good." God has work for everybody to do. The common good: the life of the church and the broader life of the world depends on it.

Most of us are ministers. One of the secrets about us, in addition to the fact that most of us struggled with the decision to go to seminary, to seek ordination, to be a minister, is the fact that the question of our vocation recurs and is, in a very real sense a lifelong question. In his wonderful memoir, *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey Through a Country Church*, Richard Lischer remembers his seminary graduation and how the years of preparation had opened a breach between the naïve faith he had brought with him into the system and the naïve secularism with which he was leaving. "Without fully realizing it," Lischer says, "some of us were quietly canceling the terms of our call." We "accepted assignments [in obscure churches] because eight years of theological education had rendered us, like our professors, unemployable in the real world."² After years of grooming he was not even sure he wanted to be a pastor. And then he moved to his first small country church and fell head over heels in love and found his call—or recall—to use Jim Kay's good description, his vocation, confirmed over and over again, doing the sometimes mundane, sometimes breathtaking, tasks of ministry.

But the vocational question continued. Later in the book Lischer asks for all of us: "Does the work of ministry really have the significance we attach to it?... The minister may drive 25 miles to a hospital in order to recite a thirty-second prayer and make the sign of the cross over a comatose parishioner. Who sees this act and calls it good?" Who among us hasn't asked that question? An hour it took me, after getting hopelessly lost in the cornfields of Central Ohio. The parishioner was stone deaf and her caretaker brought her to me in her wheelchair in the large waiting room in the hub of the nursing home, with other elderly residents dozing in the Naugahyde chairs, staring at the soap opera blaring on the large television set. I was still new. I introduced myself—struggled to make a conversation. She couldn't hear a word and so I talked louder and louder—terribly self-conscious—competing

² Richard Lischer, *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey Through a Country Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 40.

with *The Young and the Restless*—now perspiring profusely. Sensing the futility of the exercise, desperately wanting not to be there, I asked her if I could pray. She did not respond so I prayed, veritably shouted, bellowed my prayer, shook her hand and headed for the door, and as I was walking away she finally spoke in a loud, clear voice—“who was that man?”

“Who sees this act and judges it to be good?” I am going to presume to say that the one who sees this act and the thousands like it and validates it and sanctifies it, and makes it part of a kingdom which is coming—is the same one who claimed you in your baptism and called you and promises never to let you go. Professor James Fowler has written helpfully that vocation is larger than one’s job, occupation, or career. “Vocation is the response a person makes with his or her total self to the address of God. . . . so as to put it all at the disposal of God’s purposes in the services of God and the neighbor.”³ Part of the way to know what your vocation is involves identifying your centering commitments. I was deeply moved to learn about the death of Pat Tillman. Tillman was a football player and a good one, a defensive back for the Arizona Cardinals. After September 11, 2001, Pat Tillman started thinking about his life—and the world and his values. He started thinking about family members who had gone to war—thinking about his grandfather who had been at Pearl Harbor. In the middle of negotiating a \$3.6 million contract, he told his agent: “I haven’t done a damn thing as far as laying myself on the line like that.” So he enlisted, walked away from millions of dollars and life as a professional athlete and joined the Army and became an Army Ranger and was sent to Afghanistan and died—we know by friendly fire—but he was there because he wanted to make a difference.

Part of knowing your vocation is to identify and embrace your centering commitments. And part of it is identifying and acknowledging your gifts—what you are good at. Paul’s assertion is stunning. God gives each one a gift for the common good. Everybody is good at something, something the community needs.

The final part of discovering or reclaiming your calling, your vocation, is to listen carefully to your own heart and spirit. Sometimes we assume that God wants us to do something we would rather not do so that having a vocation means self-sacrifice and personal deprivation. A friend of mine described the process as God dragging him, heels dug in, creating furrows across one thousand miles of prairie, from Denver, job and home, to the front steps of McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. But sometimes, and

³ James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 95.

maybe often, it is the very opposite. Maybe what we are supposed to do has something to do with our deepest love. I have always been intrigued by something St. Augustine said about vocation: “Love God and do what you will.” It does not necessarily mean changing jobs or doing anything differently. It may mean just that, of course, but it would not be a good thing if everybody in our congregation quit his or her job tomorrow and signed up to go to seminary—a dreadful thought, come to think of it! And I want respectfully to propose that it may not be a good idea to quit your ministry and conclude that God really does not want you to be a minister every time you are unhappy, or things are going badly, or you’re bored. It may mean recommitting to what we are doing, acknowledging that we are using our God-given gifts to their fullest. It may mean a holy renewal of your vocation as pastor, preacher, parent, spouse, homemaker, grandparent, teacher, business executive, doctor, lawyer, volunteer, plumber, carpenter, or clerk.

What it means for each of us, however we earn our living, is to know ourselves loved by God, claimed by God in our baptism, needed by God, gifted by God with skills, abilities, capacities, potential, that are uniquely ours, which the church needs, the community needs, the world needs, for the common good—and which our Lord Jesus Christ calls us to use passionately and energetically and lovingly. “The place God calls you,” Frederick Buechner once said, “is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Or as St. Augustine said centuries before, “Love God and do what you will.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

Unfair Treatment

By FLEMING RUTLEDGE

Romans 5:6, 8-10

Fleming Rutledge, having spent twenty-two years in parish ministry, now has an international preaching vocation. Her most recent books are The Battle for Middle-earth: Tolkein's Divine Design in The Lord of the Rings, and The Seven Last Words from the Cross. This sermon was delivered in Miller Chapel on July 1, 2004 as part of the Seminary's Institute of Theology.

A FEW DAYS AGO, I heard something on the radio about the young Korean Christian who was working in Iraq as a foreign contractor when he was captured and held hostage. As I'm sure you know, he was filmed pleading for his life in the most heartbreaking fashion. Finally he was beheaded in the hideous ritual that has become all too familiar. His funeral was held yesterday in South Korea. According to the broadcast I heard, the terrorist who announced the gruesome and barbarous deed said, "The infidel got his fair treatment." That got me thinking about what fair treatment is.

A few days ago a news report described the scene of chaos just after one of the many recent bombings in Iraq. American, British, and French contractors were killed. Near the carnage, a young Iraqi man stood at his watermelon stand. The reporter wrote that, like many Iraqis, he seemed to have mixed feelings. He watched as a gathering mob looted and pounded the destroyed vehicles. He said, "That is wrong, that is disrespectful." But a moment later, he said, speaking of the butchered victims, "They deserved this."¹ A third episode: The Army recently released a number of internal documents reporting that five former Iraqi generals, handcuffed and blindfolded, were beaten until bloody by American soldiers. (Indeed, one of them died later.) A military analyst who witnessed this reported it to his sergeant, but the sergeant took no action. He said that the prisoners "probably deserved it."²

Who deserves what? And who decides? Isn't it obvious to any thinking person that the whole matter of "deserving" depends upon your point of view, your allegiances, your priorities, your cultural conditioning? Whole histories are constructed around who deserves what. The Nazis fabricated a narrative about the Jews. The Serbs constructed a narrative about the Kosovo Albanians to justify the "ethnic cleansing," and now that the Albanian Kosovars have returned home, they are retaliating against the Serbs, because

¹ Jeffrey Gettleman, "21 Killed in Iraq and Dozens Hurt in Bomb Attacks," *New York Times*, June 15, 2004.

² Andrea Elliott, "Unit Says It Gave Earlier Warning of Abuse in Iraq," *New York Times*, June 24, 2004.

"they deserve it."³ One of the American hostages presently being held in Iraq is a young Marine, a Muslim born in Lebanon. Being an Arabic speaker, he joined the Marines to serve as a translator. He was displayed on video, blindfolded with a sword held menacingly above his head. As far as we know he is still alive. The latest news about him is that he had become emotionally distraught, deserted the Marines, and then got picked up by the insurgents.⁴ This means that if he is killed, both sides will have reason to think that he got fair treatment—the Marines will think so because he was a weakling and a deserter, and the insurgents will think so because he was enlisted with the infidels.

Who deserves what? And who decides? That phrasing comes from one of my favorite stories about a reunion I attended. It was the fiftieth reunion of some of the men who had served in World War II with the fabled Tenth Mountain Division. One of the men there, whom I knew, was a very bookish person, very unprepossessing physically, a lover of poetry and other quiet pursuits. He was the least military, least bellicose person you could imagine. Very few people in the community knew that he had won the Silver Star until this reunion when he was called up front for special mention. He gently but firmly brushed aside the homage with these deeply wise words: "Nobody knows who deserves what." I think I know just what he meant. Many people are quiet heroes—the person who learns to live with cerebral palsy, or struggles to overcome an addiction, or fights against despair in prison, or speaks out against injustice even though it costs him his job—these are often known to God alone.

Who deserves what? I have often quoted a line from the Clint Eastwood movie *Unforgiven*. Clint's young sidekick has shot a man. They watch him dying slowly and in pain. The young man is uneasy about this spectacle. Seeking to justify what he has done, he says to the Clint Eastwood character, "He had it coming." Clint says, "We all had it coming." A more recent movie is called, aptly enough, *Road to Perdition*. It features a terrific performance by Paul Newman, playing against type in the role of a mobster. Here's the scenario. Tom Hanks plays a young man who pretends to have a legitimate occupation but in fact works for Newman. On Newman's orders, Hanks carries out a gangland-style execution of several men. Unfortunately, Tom Hanks's young son accidentally witnesses this event. A hit man is therefore

³ There is a story illustrating this in a sermon called "Adam and Christ" in my book *Help My Unbelief*.

⁴ Jeffrey Gettleman and Nick Madigan, "Abducted Marine Had Reportedly Deserted," *New York Times*, June 30, 2004. This particular hostage was fortunate to be released after the date of this sermon, but that does not negate the point.

dispatched to rub out Tom Hanks's wife and son and does so in cold blood.⁵ Hanks goes to Newman to ask for justice. The two of them sit together in a room facing each other. Tom Hanks says to Paul Newman: "He murdered my wife and son." Paul Newman leans across and says to Tom Hanks: "There are only murderers in this room." With this memorable stroke the story Hanks has constructed for himself is unmasked.

When it comes to deciding who deserves what, the universal human tendency is to declare oneself innocent. Then this is followed by a sense of personal injury and a wish to strike back. If there is a conflict we see only our own wounded innocence, or the wounded innocence of our own family, friends, and countrymen. We feel the pain only of those who are like ourselves. I most certainly include myself here. I am disappointed in myself when I catch myself in an involuntary reaction against some of the people I see in the subways in New York City. Everyone has these kinds of thoughts sometimes. We have great difficulty understanding the lives of those from cultures that are strange to us, so we don't have empathy for them. We have recently learned from news reports about the numerous innocent people who have been held in our federal detention centers for months on end. They have suffered because of their cultural strangeness; simply being short, or dark, or speaking no English opens the door to a degree of abuse and mistreatment that seems antithetical to everything that our country is supposed to stand for.⁶ Someone in power, sometimes a very petty and small kind of power, decides that these people do not deserve the same sort of treatment that more privileged Americans take for granted.

Is something happening to our American values? Where is the Christian Church in all this? I have recently collected testimony from three witnesses, not one of them a practicing Christian. The first is a prominent writer, Michael Ignatieff of Harvard, who gave a long interview on C-Span two weeks ago. He had been a strong supporter of the invasion of Iraq, but now that we are talking about torture and quite probably engaging in it, Ignatieff is having second thoughts. He has written a new book and is on the circuit talking about torture. He states his belief that it can never be justified. The second witness is Ron Reagan, the son of the late president. He is emphatically not a Christian and says so, but he has some challenges for us. In an

⁵ I have left out some important details of the plot because I wanted to concentrate on a single point.

⁶ See for instance the front-page article about a Nepalese who spoke no English and was arrested, detained for months, kept naked and incommunicado in a tiny cell, and finally freed—the final humiliation—with no clothes except his orange prison jump suit. His offense? Taking pictures of New York City buildings to take home to his wife in Nepal.

interview last week he said, "If you are going to call yourself a Christian . . . then you have to ask yourself a fundamental question, and that is, whom would Jesus torture? Whom would Jesus drag around on a dog leash? How can Christians tolerate it? It is unconscionable." The third witness is Dr. Allen Keller, director of the Bellevue/New York University Program for Survivors of Torture. In an interview he recounted the ghastly histories of some of his patients who survived torture, and then he said, "How could people do such things? I'm scared that it's easier than we think." Since that interview his words have proven distressingly prophetic. He opposes torture to extract information from terrorists. "We mustn't go there," he said; "It cheapens who we are."⁷

Who is competent to decide whether to torture another person? Rowan Williams, in his little book called *Christ on Trial*, recounts an experience of Jean Vanier, the man who founded and directed the L'Arche communities for people who are developmentally disabled. He had made the choice to step down from his position as leader and live alongside one particular disturbed young adult. (Henri Nouwen did this also.) The young man screamed and ranted in a very aggressive way. Jean Vanier testified that the young man's behavior was deeply disturbing to him. He discovered that he had within himself deep deposits of anger that he had not known were there. He wrote, "If I had been alone with him, not in community, I could have been tempted to hit him." Notice two things here: one is the subterranean potential for punitive violence that lies within each of us, and the other is the need for communities committed to the mind of Christ, communities of mutual accountability where the darker urges of its individual members find no place to grow.

The mind of Christ. What does that mean? Here is some of what Paul writes in one of his key passages: "While we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly . . . God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life" (Romans 5:6, 8–10). While we were helpless, while we were weak, while we were sinners, while we lay in bonds under the sentence of the wrath of God, *while we were God's enemies* and enemies of one another—those were our circumstances. Those were the circumstances in which Christ came into this

⁷ Jan Hoffman, "Treating Torture Victims, Body and Soul," *New York Times*, July 30, 2003.

world and offered himself up to death by torture. *While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.* This is the mind of God, this is the mind of Christ. This is what God did for his enemies. What did we deserve? The passage is quite clear; we were deserving of God's wrath. For reasons not entirely clear to me, people love to sing the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," but we never seem to entertain the idea that "the fateful lightning of [God's] terrible swift sword" might have been turned against *us*. Instead, God deflected it, taking his own stroke himself.

I'm going to read something that Augustine of Hippo wrote about this passage from Romans. "The fact that we were reconciled through Christ's death must not be understood as if his Son reconciled us to [God] so that he might now begin to love those whom he had hated. Rather . . . 'God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us' [Romans 5:8]. Therefore he loved us even when we practiced enmity toward him and committed wickedness. Thus in a marvelous and divine way he loved us even when he hated us. For he hated us for what we were that he had not made; yet because our wickedness had not entirely consumed his handiwork, he knew how, at the same time, to hate in each one of us what we had made, and to love what he had made."⁹ That, I think, is one of the most wonderful things I have ever read about any passage of scripture.

Who deserves what? What is fair treatment? Who decides? If only we can rise up and act according to our baptismal identity! May it happen in us! May we be convicted in this truth! We were saved from the wrath of God. We who were God's enemies have become his friends by reconciliation through Christ. We have been saved by the intervention of the One who had the power and the right to obliterate us but instead pitied us in our enslavement to sin and death. We were saved "by his blood," that is, by his life-offering poured out in pain and abandonment as One who had no power and no standing in the world, One who took his place along with the least and last of us—no, even more than that, One who was numbered with the transgressors, with the perpetrators. And in this way we who were God's enemies were clothed with a new righteousness, the righteousness of the Son of God. None of this had anything whatsoever to do with our deserving. Who among us alone in the middle of the night with insomnia, or awakened by a sudden stab of physical pain, or suffering from a grief that won't heal—who among us is comforted with the thought of our *deserving*? Deserving has nothing to do with it. The gospel is not about who deserves what. The Kingdom of God is

⁹ Augustine, *John's Gospel*, 110.6. Quoted in John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.16.4.

like a man who works one hour in the cool of the evening and then receives the same wage as those who worked all day in the heat.

Fair treatment? Who wants that? While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. How much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

A prayer:

Come, Almighty Word, we pray, and give voice to your Church in the crisis of our time. O Lord of all the nations, we pray for the soul of Western civilization that we may not fail in this hour of testing to embody the highest that you have called us to be. We, your people called by your name, beseech you to strengthen in us what is right and true, reform what is false and wrong, purge what is cruel and heartless, and give us the grace to grant us true repentance when we are in error. Give moral courage to all Christians serving in the armed forces, especially the commanders, granting them wisdom for their mission of forming young hearts and minds for what is humane and right even in the midst of war. Give courage to those who feel called to protest against injustice, and increase their numbers. Be merciful to all prisoners and give patience to those who must work as prison guards. Give us hearts of compassion toward all families who suffer from the horrors of war. Help us to look for your hidden presence among those who are presently our enemies, and turn the hearts of all those who plan evil. Grant wisdom and insight to our leaders and O Lord, do not let us fall away from our vocation to be a people willing to sacrifice for the freedom of all your creatures in every kindred and tongue. We pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, who together with you and our Lord Jesus Christ reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Power and Leadership: Moses and the Manna Story

By DENNIS T. OLSON

Exodus 16

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HOW DO WE best exercise power in leadership among the people of God? One way to answer that question is to turn to one of God's greatest leaders in the Old Testament, the figure of Moses. In particular, how did Moses lead the Israelites as they grumbled and murmured their way through the wilderness journey from the bondage of Egypt to the freedom of the promised land? Our primary focus will be the story of God's gracious gift of manna as food in the wilderness in Exodus 16. We will conclude with a series of what we might call "manna principles of leadership" that flow out of our reflections on the manna story in Exodus.

Exodus 16:1-3: Complaining in the Wilderness, Yearning for Egypt

We begin our study of Exodus 16 with verses 1-3. The Israelites are a ragtag band of former slaves trudging through a forbidding wilderness. Their number is large. Exodus 12:37 reports, "The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children." That is six hundred thousand men plus roughly an equal number of children plus a similar number of women. If you do the math, you have an enormous company of people. Scholars have questioned the historical veracity of this number. How could such a small clan of seventy Israelites at the beginning of the book of Exodus balloon into one or two million in such a relatively short time under the harsh conditions of slavery (Exodus 1:5)?¹ Whether historical or not, the present form of the story places the spotlight on God's wondrous blessing of Israel in multiplying their number in the

¹Citations to passages from Exodus will be included in parentheses in the text without reference to the book.

midst of struggle and hardship. But this blessing of many children and large numbers itself creates its own challenges when you are traveling in a desolate desert. And so we come to Exodus 16 and one of those basic and primal challenges in preserving the life and spirit of this people of God.

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (16:1-3)

At the beginning of his adult life, Moses had been unsuccessful in trying to arbitrate a dispute between two Hebrew slaves in the story of Moses killing the Egyptian foreman (2:11-15). Now Moses is faced with a dispute not with only two Hebrews but a dispute with a huge mob of angry Hebrews. All the congregation murmurs against Moses about the hardships of the wilderness. Living on distorted memories, the Israelites pine for the “good old days” of slavery back in Egypt when at least they had food to eat. They have already forgotten the forced slavery and abusive oppression of Egypt.

Israel had been camping for a brief time at Elim. Elim was an oasis “where there were twelve springs of waters and seventy palm trees” (15:27). But Moses was leading the Israelites on a journey to a far destination, and Israel could not stay in this place of comfort and security. Leadership is about movement, growth, change, and a journey to somewhere else. Moses commands the departure from Elim after a brief time of refreshment, a sabbath rest on the journey. The departure from Elim forces the people to face again their lack of adequate food, water, and life support square in the face. The crisis of the wilderness involves the material reality of basic human needs and the profound anxiety that results when there is no visible means by which these needs can be met.

So to whom does the congregation turn? Its leaders, of course! The people attack the leadership of Moses and Aaron who have chosen freedom for Israel. It is hard to try to urge people into a freedom they are not sure they want. In the people’s minds, “if wilderness freedom is like this, we want to exercise our freedom and go back to Egyptian bondage.” They remember the “fleshpots” of Egypt, the clay pots of roasting meat. As slaves, they likely had little meat in their diet, but at least they remember the smell! At least they had bread, some basic kind of food in Egypt. Nowhere earlier in Exodus does

it say the Israelites were ever hungry in Egypt. In contrast, the wilderness appears to these former slaves as a place of no meat, no bread, and thus seemingly no life. In their minds, desert and wilderness spell death and chaos.

The association of wilderness with death and chaos reflects a common ancient Near Eastern understanding. There are two basic images of chaos, evil, and death in the Old Testament and in the ancient Near East in general. One image of chaos is the wilderness. The desert is a place of threat, struggle, death, and chaos. So when Jesus in the beginning of Luke's Gospel was "led by the Spirit" to be tempted by the devil for forty days, we should not be surprised that the arena of this struggle with the forces of evil and chaos is "the wilderness" (Luke 4:1-2). To be in the desert is a metaphor for being at the front lines in battling the forces of chaos in the world. The ancient desert fathers lived in Christian communities in the wilderness. Some of them even lived alone as isolated hermits in the desert in a life of prayer and study of scripture. I have visited Coptic Christian desert monasteries and communities in Egypt. Even today, some of their members live alone in primitive huts out in the desert situated like distant satellites from the main community. They understand their vocation as fighting the forces of evil and temptation in the wilderness through their simple and solitary life of devotion and study of scripture.

The second major image of chaos in the Bible and ancient Near East is the sea and its powerful, turbulent, and sometimes deadly waters of chaos and evil. It is these primeval waters of chaos that are in view in the creation story in Genesis 1:1-2 when the world was a "formless voice and darkness covered the face of the deep" and the *ruakh* (wind/spirit/breath) of God "swept over the face of the waters." God's creating work in Genesis 1 involves taming, ordering, and setting boundaries to the primeval waters of chaos. Jewish scholar Jon Levenson notes in his book entitled *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* that these primeval waters do not disappear from God's created world but remain on the boundaries, above and below, always threatening humankind and the world.² The sea is also home to the mythic sea monster variously known as Leviathan or Rahab. In the cultural mind of the ancient world, this primeval dragon is seen as one of the sources and embodiments of the powers of evil, chaos, and destruction. At times in the Bible, these sea monsters are portrayed merely as tame creatures of God clearly under God's rule. So Genesis 1:21 simply says, "So God created the great sea monsters." Psalm 104:26 testifies that God placed the sea dragon Leviathan in the great and

² Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

wide sea “to sport in it.” One need not fear Leviathan; it is only God’s little rubber ducky in the sea! But at a few other points in the Bible, the sea monster is more mythic, menacing, and in battle with God. Psalm 74:12–14 provides an alternate view of the role of the sea monsters in the creation of the world at odds with the more serene depiction in Genesis 1:

Yet God my King is from of old,
 Working salvation in the earth.
 You divided the sea by your might;
 You broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.
 You crushed the head of Leviathan;
 You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.

In the prophetic literature, God’s battle and defeat of the sea monster may refer not only to the beginning of time but also to a future eschatological battle of God with the forces of evil and empire: “On that day the LORD with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan, the twisting serpent, and he will kill the Dragon that is in the sea” (Isa. 27:1).

These associations of chaos and evil with sea and sea monster continue into the New Testament in the Gospel stories of Jesus stilling the storm on the sea (Mark 4:35–41 and parallels) and the apocalyptic vision of Revelation with the death of the beast (Rev. 19:20) and the assurance in the vision of the new heaven and earth that “the sea was no more” (Rev. 21:1). This rich complex of motifs of evil and chaos associated with the sea and its monsters of imperial evil inform and animate one of the central stories of Exodus, the crossing of the Red Sea. In Exodus 14–15, God’s *ruakh* blows over the waters, separates them, and creates the dry land on which the Israelites walk into new freedom and life (14:21). And as Pharaoh and the Egyptian army pursue Israel, God fights and defeats them by allowing the waters of chaos to come crashing down upon the imperial monster of Egyptian might (14:27–29; 15:3–10).

So the book of Exodus is about God and Moses leading Israel through these two primal images of chaos, death, and struggle: the sea in the Red Sea event and the wilderness in the desert journey from Egypt to Canaan. Thus, the people of Israel have a legitimate concern as they begin their journey in the wilderness. The Israelites can see the wilderness only as a place of hunger and death, without hope. By contrast, they remember Egypt as a place of pots of flesh, clay pots of roasting meat, and plenty of bread. They forget the abuse and horror of slavery and yearn to go back. They forget the distant hope of freedom and plenty in the promised land of Canaan in the face of the immediate crisis over the shortage of food.

We are reminded here of the twin brothers, the elder Esau and the younger Jacob, in the book of Genesis. Esau had been out hunting all day and came home famished. His younger twin brother Jacob was cooking a pot of stew. Ever the schemer, Jacob offered his hungry brother some stew in exchange for Esau's birthright as the elder son who would eventually inherit his parents' estate. Esau foolishly gives up his birthright and promise of inheritance for the immediate gratification of a bowl of stew (Gen. 25:29–34). Similarly, Israel seems ready to give up its hard-won freedom and the promise of Canaan for a whiff of meat and a lump of bread back in Egypt.

What is very interesting, however, is that Israel is not reprimanded in this narrative for its anxious concern for food in the wilderness. Instead, God responds immediately and positively to their complaint about the lack of food. In other words, there are some murmurings and grumblings that are legitimate in the Exodus journey. There are times when leaders need to listen to their people and respond to their complaints. There are two clusters of wilderness murmuring stories, one cluster recounted in the book of Exodus and another cluster of complaint stories narrated in the book of Numbers. Several similarities are evident between these two clusters (desire for water, food, yearning to go back to Egypt, attack on the human leaders, and the like). But there is one crucial difference. The murmuring stories in Exodus 15–17 that occur *before* the covenant is made at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19–31) and the breaking of that covenant in the golden calf story (Exodus 32) are all portrayed as *legitimate* complaints: the need for water, food, the desire for meat. In contrast, the murmuring stories that occur *after* the Sinai covenant and the golden calf incident in Numbers 11–21 are all narrated as illegitimate complaints that reflect a deepening failure to trust God. In these latter stories, Israel and God have bound themselves in covenant with one another. God has repeatedly demonstrated divine faithfulness and graciousness over time. The Israelites have ample basis for trusting in God's trustworthiness and provision in the wilderness. So complaint becomes, in these later stories in the book of Numbers, a sign of deepening unfaith, impatience, and unreasonableness. Leaders need to develop the wisdom to discern when complaints are legitimate and require positive response and when they are not legitimate and require reprimand and judgment.

At this early point in the wilderness journey in Exodus 16, Israel's complaint and yearning for food is a legitimate concern and does not require judgment or repentance. What is required is God's gracious response because the hunger is real, the wilderness is barren, and the recently freed slaves have little track record on which to rely to trust this God who has called them out into the desert.

Exodus 16:4-12: The Promise of Manna, the Appearance of God

God's positive response to the Israelites' complaint is direct and dramatic in Exodus 16:4-15. We begin with verses 4 and 5: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day; in that way I will test them whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.' "

Each day the people will gather enough manna for the needs of that day and no more. But on the sixth day and only on the sixth day, they will be allowed to gather twice as much manna in order that they might keep some of the manna overnight and eat it on the sabbath or seventh day of the week. Thus, the Israelites will be able to rest from their labor of gathering manna on the sabbath day.

In verses 6-12, Moses and Aaron tell the Israelites that their complaint to Moses and Aaron about food is ultimately a theological matter. Where the most basic human needs for life are concerned, that is where God gets involved. The leaders assure the people with words that God has indeed heard their complaints (16:6-9). As further dramatic assurance, God's own glorious presence appears to the people, veiled in a cloud (16:10). So the people hear with their ears and see with their eyes that God has in fact heard their cries for help.

Exodus 16:13-15: The Promise Fulfilled, the Daily Gift Given

Immediately, God acts. In the evening, quail covers the camp and provides the people with the meat they had craved with their memories of the fleshpots of Egypt. In the morning as the dew lifted, the Israelites discovered on the ground "a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground" (16:14). When the Israelites saw it, they asked in Hebrew, *man hu?* which means, "What is it?" And so the Israelites call it *manna*, what-is-it food! Further in the chapter, the manna is described this way: "it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey" (16:31). Later in the book of Numbers, the taste of the manna is described quite differently: the taste of manna was "like the taste of cakes baked with oil" (Num. 11:8). So which is it, a sweet taste of honey or a baked taste of oil? The ancient Jewish rabbis puzzled over these varied descriptions of its taste and then concluded: manna tastes like whatever your own personal favorite food tastes. You like sweets? It tastes like sweets. You like bread? It tastes like bread. You

like pizza? It tastes like pizza. Well, maybe not like pizza. But in any case, such is the wondrous food of God.³

Particularly since the nineteenth and early twentieth century, some scholars have sought to give a rational or naturalistic explanation for this biblical manna. Even in ancient times as with the Jewish historian Josephus, it was known that there was a natural substance found in the wilderness of northern Arabia and elsewhere that resembled the biblical manna. Modern scientific study offered some detail about a yellowish-white flake or ball that forms from the interaction of a plant lice or insect and the sap from the tamarisk tree that grows in the wilderness. This sweet-tasting substance congeals in the cool of the night but quickly melts and decays in the heat of the day, much like the biblical description of manna. Such naturalistic explanations are tantalizing, but they miss the larger theological meanings of the story that offer a paradigm for understanding human dependence on God, God's trustworthy generosity, the need for equity in the distribution of resources related to basic human needs such as food, and reassurance in the face of common human urges to hoard out of fear and anxiety for the future. If we focus only on whether this was a miracle or simply a natural phenomenon, we miss the more significant message that the biblical writers convey in this story.

Exodus 16:16–30: Daily Bread and the Sabbath

Apart from the provision of the manna itself, the other major theme in Exodus 16 is the sabbath day of rest. The bread, the manna given on the sixth day is doubled and so is enough for the seventh day as well. This theme of sabbath weaves throughout this narrative concerning free bread from God. In regard to instructions about resting on the sabbath, God says that "I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not" (16:4). Will Israel be prepared to receive bread and life under entirely new terms and completely changed conditions from those of Egypt and its slavery?

The ways of receiving bread in Egypt do not apply here in the wilderness. Israel will be under scrutiny to see if the old ways of receiving bread in Egypt under the condition of anxiety, oppression, and hoarding can be resisted. Here in the wilderness is a different way. The Israelites can confidently go out each morning and know that the gift of manna will be there: "morning by

³ James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 618–19. The reference is to Mekhilta deR. Ishmael, Amaleq 1.

morning they gathered it, as much as each needed" (16:21). But Moses lays out the conditions for how the manna is to be gathered.

This is what the Lord has commanded: "Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person, according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents." The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning." But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning and it bred worms and become foul. And Moses was angry with them. (16:16–20)

These are the two conditions for gathering bread. 1) The people should harvest just enough bread as needed for the one day. 2) Any manna that is stored or hoarded as surplus will become foul and useless.

Provision for the bread becomes a model for right distribution of food, a paradigm for a properly organized covenant community that is centered around God's unfailing generosity. The wondrous reality about the distribution of this bread is that this non-competitive and non-hoarding practice can really work, and it can work for everyone in the community. The ones who gathered much do not have too much; the ones who gathered a little have no lack. The bread has a way of being where it is needed with everyone having enough. God is faithful and trustworthy. The people of God, however, find it very hard to trust God in this way. Some seek to store up the bread in violation of Moses' warning. People in the wilderness immediately try to replicate the old ways of Egypt by storing up and hoarding out of anxiety and greed. Recall back in Exodus, chapter 1, one of the projects that the Israelite slaves were building in Egypt was supply cities and storehouses for Pharaoh (1:11). The Israelites try to replicate such hoarding practices with the manna in the wilderness, but stored, hoarded, and surplus bread simply breeds worms, turns sour, and melts away (16:20–21).

The sabbath principle is a critical part of how this leveling and equity of basic human resources is understood. Verses 22–26 continue God's instructions concerning the manna and the sabbath:

On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, he said to them, "This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the LORD; bake what you want to

bake and boil want you want to boil, and all that is left over put it aside to be kept until morning.’ ” So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, “Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none.” (16:22–26)

This special practice is permitted on the sixth day to provide food for the sabbath that follows. Once again, however, Israel disobeys. In verse 27, some overly anxious people go out on the sabbath, but they find no manna, no bread from heaven. God’s kitchen is closed for the sabbath, too. We are reminded here of the seventh day of creation in Genesis, chapter 2 when God joins the rest of creation in resting on the sabbath (Gen. 2:1–3). Later in Exodus, God concludes the instructions for the work of building the holy Tabernacle with another reminder to Israel to refrain from work on the sabbath because the sabbath “is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed” (31:17). Even God needed rest and refreshment, and so the human created in the image of God likewise needs regular rest on the sabbath. The lowliest worker to the most important of leaders (including God!) is not exempt from this friendly command to rest on the sabbath.

Exodus 16:31–36: Dusting Off the Old Clay Jar

The end of the chapter contains an interesting command that gives a clear indication of the ongoing importance of this manna story. God commands Moses to place some of the manna in a clay jar for safekeeping. The clay jar is a kind of safe-deposit box that is to be displayed in the place of worship “throughout your generations.” This preservation and display of the manna for future generations is a way of saying that the meaning of the manna is not just something for this transitional period in the wilderness. The manna story is meant to define and shape individuals and lives for all future generations. If that is the case, then every time we place this manna story before us and examine our lives in light of it, we are symbolically dusting off the old clay jar with the manna inside. We read the story and use the jar to jog our memories, reorient our priorities, and shape our life and faith again to God’s ways, not our ways.

Manna Principles of Leadership

Given our topic for these Bible studies on Moses and leadership, what might this clay jar of manna say to us about the nature and practice of leadership in our communities today? What are some “manna principles of leadership” that can guide us as we reflect on our roles as leaders of God’s people journeying through our particular wildernesses toward what we hope is a better promised land?

1) *When you are in the wilderness, expect murmurings.* Wilderness is an anxiety-generating environment, a scary place that often creates fear and dysfunction. Whenever a community is in transition and in the wilderness, it can become a threatening place of chaos. When a community is in such transition, be sure that complaints and murmurings will arise. People will yearn for the good old days, however distorted their memories of those days may be. Parts and members of the organization will often resist change. Do not be surprised by such resistance and attacks against leaders. Expect it, and try not to take it too personally. That may be difficult to do; it was for Moses. In complex human systems in chaos or crisis, people will act out all kinds of anxiety, try to triangulate, find scapegoats, and set up allegiances of one against the other.

Some years ago Michael Walzer wrote a fascinating book entitled *Exodus and Revolution*.⁴ As a political scientist, Walzer was interested in how the image of the ancient Israel’s political liberation from oppression and exodus out of Egypt has been used and reinterpreted in political revolutions and uprising against oppressive regimes in the whole history of the Western world even into the modern period. Walzer examines numerous examples of resistance groups that used the Exodus as a guiding paradigm, including the English Puritans, Latin American liberation movements, and African Americans who fought against the oppression and enslavement of their people. Walzer dedicates a whole chapter entitled “Murmurings: Slaves in the Wilderness” to the inevitable struggles of a people in the aftermath of their initial liberation and the frequent chaos, anxiety, yearning for the old days, and infighting that may emerge in tumultuous times of change and transition.

2) *Discern the difference between legitimate complaints and illegitimate murmurings.* As a leader and especially in times of conflict, learn to know the difference between those murmurings that are legitimate and require immediate attention and those that do not. As we noted, the wilderness stories portray some complaints and concerns as entirely reasonable and so God

⁴ Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

responds positively. Do not take every complaint as a personal attack on you. Sometimes the complaints express legitimate needs that require resolution and remedy. Other murmurings, as in the book of Numbers, may not be legitimate but are instead judged by God and Israel's leaders as examples of unfaith, rebellion, envy, and greed. As leaders, learn to know the difference between a legitimate gripe and a complaint masking another illegitimate agenda.

3) *Share the burden of leadership.* Do not go it alone. In Exodus 16, Moses and Aaron are faced with a legitimate but seemingly impossible need: food for hundreds of thousands of people in a desolate wilderness. They rightly turn to God because the crisis exceeds their individual capacities to address it. Another murmuring story follows the manna story in Exodus 17, and this time the need is even more urgent than the need for food. Israel needs water. Moses rightly cries out to God for assistance, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me" (17:4). God wisely instructs Moses to ask some others to join him: "take some of the elders of Israel with you" and strike the rock from which water comes gushing forth for all Israel (17:5). In the same chapter, Moses leads the Israelites in a defensive battle against the attacking Amalekites. As long as Moses' arms are raised up, the battle goes well. But Moses grows weary and so "Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side and the other on the other side" and so Israel is victorious (17:8–13). Moses could not do it alone. Take others with you. Ask for help. Distribute authority and responsibility.

Interestingly, that continues to be precisely the lesson learned in the next chapter after the manna story in Exodus, chapter 18. Moses' father-in-law Jethro observes an overworked and burned-out Moses who sits alone and judges disputes among the Israelites from sunrise to sunset. Jethro tells Moses, "What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone" (18:17–18). Thus, Jethro suggests that Moses raise up leaders and judges to adjudicate all minor cases, thereby freeing Moses to spend his limited time dealing with the most important cases and issues. "So," says Jethro to his son-in-law, "it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden for you" (18:22). Leaders need to share power in order that they may focus on what is the core of their calling and what responsibilities and ministries can be shared with the whole people of God.

Some years later in the wilderness in the book of Numbers, we stumble again on an Israelite murmuring episode involving quail and manna. This time it is God and not the foreign Midianite priest Jethro who suggests a similar remedy to Moses about sharing leadership responsibilities. A dis-

traught Moses has forgotten the lesson of Exodus 18. Again he has burned himself out trying to lead Israel through the wilderness. Moses has come to the end of his rope, and Moses screams at God in desperation: "I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once . . . and do not let me see my misery!" (Num. 11:15). God calms Moses down and appoints seventy elders to assist Moses in his leadership responsibilities. Leaders need to remember that they do not need to carry the whole world on their shoulders alone. Even leaders, indeed even God who is Lord of Lords, must find sabbath ways to rest and be refreshed in the arduous work of leading God's people (31:17). Leaders, created in the image of God, need to do the same.

4) Provide realistic assurance that God is faithful and will provide the resources necessary to endure. The leader of God's people seeks to encourage trust and hope in the God of the exodus, a God who has been faithful in the past and will be faithful on into a future not yet seen. It may be that all that can be promised at the moment is that God will provide enough of the resources to make it through another day. But that is enough. With that, we can take one more small step toward God's promised future. The Old Testament story of manna was likely a key origin for that petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." Our daily manna, our daily bread—that is all for which we need ask for that is all that we need for the moment.

5) Keep the community pointed away from the old Egypt and toward God's new future. Communities in crisis frequently have a tendency to yearn for an old bankrupt vision of an idealized past that never really was. The temptation of wilderness communities is to hedge their bets and serve two masters: God and some form of Pharaoh's old Egypt. Trust God maybe a little, but hang on to some of the old securities, too. The temptation is to play both sides of the street. But Jesus reminded his hearers: "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24). Elsewhere, Jesus says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). Once on the way, leaders must keep themselves and their communities focused on God and God's unfolding mission and future for God's people.

It is important to note that once freed from working for Pharaoh, the Israelites are not thereby freed just to work for themselves as self-serving free agents. They transform their identity from oppressed servants of Pharaoh to become free servants of the LORD. Interestingly in Exodus, the Hebrew root used to describe the Israelites as "slaves" or "servants" of Pharaoh in Egypt ('abad—5:15–16, 6:5) is the very same root for the verb used elsewhere for

Israel's "serving/worshipping" God *after* their liberation out of Egypt (10:3, 7, 24). God's exodus liberates Israel from one slavery into another, from harsh Egyptian bondage into the freeing servanthood of trust and obedience in God. This "freedom slavery" under God's gracious rule is intended to be singular and exclusive. The first of the Ten Commandments is the most important: "you shall have no other gods before me." This exclusive devotion to God means living under a different economic framework and polity from that in Egypt. And once God has set us on that trail toward the promised land, the good leader reminds the community that there is no looking back, no hankering for the old fleshpots of Egypt.

6) *The sabbath is essential to leading God's people in the chaos and challenges of the wilderness.* The manna story in Exodus 18 already assumes that sabbath rest on the seventh day of each week should be observed, even though the formal sabbath commandment does not appear until two chapters later in the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:8–11. We remember that the sabbath is commanded earlier and even before the manna story all the way back in the creation story in Genesis 2:1–3. There the sabbath is engineered into the fabric of creation and built into us as human beings from the very beginning. We are created with the need regularly to take every seventh day off to be refreshed, reoriented, and renewed.

But the manna story tells us something deeper about the meaning of sabbath. The sabbath is a way of contrasting faithful sojourning in the wilderness with oppressive slave labor in Egypt. It is a contrast in economies, in how goods and resources are distributed. Egypt's bread is given out with reluctance and only for labor that serves the empire and its interests. Egypt's bread is a readily revoked and stingy reward for human productivity and efficiency, a bread received always with anxiety and fear. In contrast, the gift of sabbath and manna ("the bread of heaven") is an invitation to break with the old destructive politics and economics of fear, exploitation, abuse, and anxiety. God has another way, the way of gift, the way of sharing, the way of trust, the way of sabbath rest and manna sufficiency. God does require important work from the people along the way. The people do have to go out and gather manna every day. But God also requires and demands rest. God's sabbath economy is a world of joyful trust and restful assurance. God's sabbath economy is a way of finding the rhythm and balance of creative work and regenerating rest.

Some clear New Testament echoes to this manna story come to mind. One is the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand with only five loaves of bread and two fish. We bring what little we can to contribute to the cause, and somehow God uses it to provide sufficiency for the rest. In the Gospel of

John, Jesus reaches back into the Exodus manna story when he proclaims that “it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven” (John 6:32). Then a few verses later, Jesus re-describes the Exodus manna, the bread from heaven, as now taking a new form. “I am the bread,” says Jesus, “that came down from heaven.” Jesus is the new life-giving manna from God that sustains us in the wilderness.

Perhaps my favorite New Testament echo of the Exodus manna story is Jesus’ parable of the laborers in the vineyards in Matthew chapter 20. “For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder,” says Jesus, “who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day [a fair wage for a day’s work in ancient times], he sent them into his vineyard.” It is 6 a.m., and these first laborers are hard at work with twelve hours of hard labor until 6 p.m. Some workers show up later at 9 a.m., and they set to work in the vineyard for the day. Other workers begin work only at noon, and still others at 3 p.m. Finally, some workers start only at 5 p.m. and work for just one hour until the six o’clock quitting time. When evening came, the owner of the vineyard tells the foreman to call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last workers, the latecomers, and proceeding to the first workers, the ones who labored a full twelve hours. Those hired at the end of day who had worked only for an hour each received one full day’s pay, one denarius. When the first workers who had been there the whole day for twelve hours saw what the others were paid, they thought they were going to receive a nice big bonus. But Jesus says each of them also received just one denarius, the same as the others. When receiving their pay, these all-day laborers grumbled at the householder. It was a grumbling not unlike the lament of the responsible elder son who, in the parable of the prodigal son, complained when the father welcomed the prodigal son home with a lavish feast. The laborers murmur and grumble at the generosity of the householder toward these last ones, these lazy and undeserving latecomers who worked for only one lousy hour: “you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day in the scorching heat.” And the householder replies, “‘Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first and the first last” (Matt. 20:1–16). Equal pay for unequal work!

I remember getting a little taste of how offensive this story is to those parts of us that follow only the economy of Egypt and Pharaoh. As a young seminarian doing a year-long internship as a student pastor, I preached on this parable of the laborers and the vineyard. I remember being accosted after the service by a prominent and well-to-do member of the congregation who was a major businessman in the community. With a reddish flush rising in his

face, he thumped my chest with his finger and said, "Young man, that is not the way the real world works. If I did that in my business, I would lose my best workers and be out of business in no time." "Well," I said, "I understand you do not feel that you could do business that way. But that *is* the way that God does business."

It is a manna principle of leadership that recognizes that in the deepest realities of the "really real" world in which God is in charge, the sabbath economy of manna, grace, gift, equality, and trust will have the final say over the economy of Egypt and the Pharaohs of the world. Given such a sabbath economy, leadership involves helping and encouraging people to share the burden, to contribute what they are able. We do our own part as well as we can with resources and abilities that are always inadequate and never enough. In the end, we trust God's grace to provide whatever more is needed to make it sufficient for the day. And along the way, God commands us to take regular time out to rest, to worship, and simply to enjoy the wondrous gifts of life, love and even the wilderness with all its wildness and challenge.

I conclude this study with words from a writer named Edward Abbey. I first encountered these words as wise counsel shared by a senior professor to a younger colleague who had just been promoted to a tenured position. Edward Abbey was eccentric and not always politically correct, but he spent his life writing novels and essays in passionate defense of maintaining the open space and wilderness of the American West. He rebelled against the forces of development, greed, and overambitious capitalism that threatened to swallow up the wild forests, deserts, and other natural landscapes that he loved. This is the recommendation he made to his readers on how to live their lives. The spirit of his words fits with the spirit of these manna principles of leadership.

One final paragraph of advice: Do not burn yourselves out.

Be as I am—a reluctant enthusiast . . . a part-time crusader, a half-hearted fanatic.

Save the other half of yourselves and your lives for pleasure and adventure. It is not enough to fight for the land; it is even more important to enjoy it. While you can. While it's still here.

So get out there and hunt and fish and mess around with your friends, ramble out yonder and explore the forests, climb the mountains, bag the peaks, run the rivers, breathe deep of that sweet and lucid air, sit quietly for a while and contemplate the precious stillness, the lovely, mysterious, and awesome space. Enjoy yourselves, keep your brain in your head

and your head firmly attached to your body,
the body active and alive, and I promise you this much:
I promise you this one sweet victory over our enemies,
over those deskbound men and women with their hearts in a safe deposit
box,
and their eyes hypnotized by desk calculators.
I promise you this: you will outlive the bastards.⁵

⁵ Edward Abbey, "Quotations," found at the following Internet URL: http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Edward_Abbey#Selected_Quotes (accessed October 19, 2004).

Review Essay

Ehrman, Bart D. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. Third Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. 505. \$49.95. Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture We Never Knew*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp. 294. \$30.00. Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp. 342. \$30.00.

Success witnesses remarkably to the work of Bart Ehrman, James A. Gray Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Ph.D., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1985). The centerpiece for this review, *The New Testament*, is in its third edition and is accompanied by two additional volumes, *Lost Christianities* and *Lost Scriptures*. Three things contribute especially to his success. One is that Ehrman writes as spiritedly as he thinks. So Jesus' inaugural sermon in his hometown in Luke 4 is certainly not a "smashing success," but nearly a "smashing failure." Remote history comes alive in entertaining and provocative analogies and contrasts. A good case is the contrasting of ancient religions, which lacked centralized organizations and creedal confessions, with many modern religions. Ehrman's summary of the Gospel of Peter in *Lost Christianities* is more interesting than reading the Gospel of Peter (and about as long). His account of the Nag Hammadi discoveries reads like Agatha Christie. Equally spellbinding is the narration of Morton Smith's discovery of a reference to the Secret Gospel of Mark and the oral report of Guy Stroumsa that he and David Flusser had seen the manuscript that contained it.

A second key to success is that Ehrman has his finger on the pulse of postmodernity. The core contention of his work is that in the early centuries of Christianity "proto-orthodoxy" battled with diverse forms of the religion and won. When Lyotard defined "postmodern" as incredulity toward any metanarrative (any grand scheme that determines how human beings should view reality), anyone's story stood on the same level with anyone else's. This outlook spelled death for intolerance and engendered valuing difference. In keeping with this outlook Ehrman calls for valuing wide-ranging varieties of early Christianity and their texts. So he consistently juxtaposes movements and texts that lost battles to become the dominant form of Christianity against a "proto-orthodox" variety that won the battles and whose texts eventually became the New Testament.

But the battles are not over. Ehrman's call for valuing diversity in early Christianities comes at a time when something comparable to proto-ortho-

doxy is calling for a canonical reading of scriptures. Whereas Ehrman colors the battles for canonicity with intrigue and deception, canonical critics such as James Sanders, Brevard Childs, Robert Moberly, and Christopher Seitz value the process and the product of canonization. They contend for reading the Bible not as a historical artifact of Western civilization but as the Church's book. With some obvious differences, the issues correspond to a debate one hundred years ago when Wilhelm Wrede argued against New Testament theology on two grounds: The issue for him was not theology but history, and the source material was not the New Testament but everything from early Christianity. Similarly, for Ehrman the subject matter is history and the source material is anything pertinent from the ancient Mediterranean world.

A third feature that contributes to his success is the wide range that these books cover without diluting the wealth of information with which they are packed. *The New Testament* especially is so rich in content that I cannot do justice to it even in an essay review. Aside from Helmut Koester's two-volume historical introduction, I know of nothing comparable in range and depth.

Like numerous other introductions *The New Testament* provides probable contexts of time, place, and circumstance and presents central features of each of the books of the New Testament. Most of this material is a matter of wide consensus that one can read in competing introductions. But both the subtitle and the contents of the book stand in a bit of conflict with a title that specifies the New Testament in that Ehrman presents the same kind of information for texts that did not make it into the New Testament. Some of these are the Acts of Paul and Thecla, The Epistle of Barnabas, the Letters of Ignatius, the Martyrdom of Polycarp, the Didache, 1 Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Apocalypse of Peter. *Lost Scriptures* repeats introductory material for all of these, provides English translations as well, some originally from Ehrman, and also gives introductions and translations of additional early Christian texts. Incidentally, most of these texts are available on the Internet, perhaps in other translations.

Ehrman's historical approach means for him that historians are limited by the canons of historiography from deciding religious truth claims. Consequently, he explicitly eschews issues of how faith is or is not related to history. This does not mean, however, that he abandons all value judgments. Jürgen Habermas contends that every author writes from ideology, that is, some kind of interest. Therefore, the notion of a disinterested historian is a ruse. Ehrman exposes some of the ideologies of early Christian authors. But in Habermas's terms, he cannot do so apart from his own interests, some of

which he acknowledges. Two are quite evident: (1) The author wishes to unmask the notion of early Christian unity in order to demonstrate diversity. In fact before introducing the New Testament, the first chapter deals with varieties of second-century Christianity, which laid the foundations for the New Testament canon, and this diversity is exhibit A in *Lost Christianities*. (2) The author wishes to create a space for tolerance of differences. Thus, these books do not merely convey information but are appropriately provocative.

Especially apposite for this approach is a chapter in *The New Testament* devoted to the prominence of women in Pauline communities and the subsequent suppression and oppression of women in early Christianity. In a related vein, Judaism in its ancient varieties appears on its terms rather than in the terms of non-Jewish authors of antiquity, and Judaism receives appropriate status as the matrix of early Christianity. Likewise the historical Jesus is located within a Jewish apocalypticism.

Inasmuch as the principle aim is early Christian history, Ehrman correctly points to the gap between events and the writing of the Gospels—the words and deeds of Jesus were written “long” (more than forty years) after the fact by people who were not eyewitnesses. On the other hand, this is also too simplistic. At least Luke makes a claim for tracing traditions back to eyewitnesses (as Ehrman acknowledges). Further, it is one thing to ask, “is it conceivable that Christians could have made up a story that proved useful in a particular situation?” and to answer that “presumably people would have good reason” to do so. It is quite another matter to cite what can be construed as historical evidence that someone made up a specific story. Otherwise, Ehrman himself, as all historians do, is making up a story. Further, though modern media are certainly different from what they were in the ancient Mediterranean world, I myself could serve as a secondary source about Roger Bannister breaking the barrier of running a mile in under four minutes or the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas*, events that are now fifty years after the fact. Further, I could give a firsthand account to some things that I personally heard Howard Thurman and Carlyle Marney say thirty to forty years ago. Ehrman himself gives an account of an alleged modern forgery published in 1950 by Paul Coleman-Norton, which is a secondhand account that derives from Bruce Metzger. Even though Metzger now has a published account, I assume Ehrman heard Metzger’s oral account in the 1980s as I did in the 1970s. Moreover, in this very review I have passed on the oral tradition that Ehrman received from Stroumsa about Morton Smith’s discovery of a reference to Secret Mark.

Too simplistic also is the representation of religious tolerance in antiquity. True, polytheism made room for adjusting to the gods of other people. But

this hardly accounts for the mockery of the gods of conquered people, after the fashion in an earlier period of Cambyses, the Persian Shah who when he conquered Egypt, ceremonially slaughtered the sacred bull Apis at Memphis. It is not without significance for religious (in)tolerance that when the Romans conquered Jerusalem in 70 CE, they destroyed the Temple. Nor does the argument for religious tolerance account adequately for debates about the existence of the gods (e.g., Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*).

A third simplification is the very notion of a proto-orthodox Christianity that won to the exclusion of other varieties. One can hardly plot victories of a single variety of Christianity in a linear fashion over against others. Rather, different varieties participate in both wins and losses. Ehrman acknowledges as much when he shows that the boundaries of proto-orthodoxy were not static and that paradoxical formulations of creeds incorporate aspects of competing varieties of early Christianity.

In some cases the author demonstrates a fitting silence where evidence is lacking but in other cases speculates. Apropos to the evidence, a great deal is made of the anonymity of the Gospels, but then Ehrman speculates about where these anonymous authors wrote (virtually compulsory in New Testament introductions). In spite of “frustratingly sparse” evidence of early Christian persuasion in Paul and Acts, Ehrman speculates that a Christian testifying that praying to Jesus had healed her daughter might have led to conversion. In what sense is this “might” historical? Strangely, at the end of his consideration of the historical Jesus, where he is quite concerned with attestation, he speculates about Judas with no attestation.

Not only does Ehrman wish to give a historical account of the New Testament, he also strives to demonstrate interpretive models. Methodologically he is commendably eclectic—using whatever is productive for understanding texts. The basic method for Mark is thematic development and the characterization of Jesus, whose identity is enigmatic for other characters. Though Ehrman distinguishes among groups of Jewish religious authorities in Mark, like many narrative critics he assumes a continuity between opponents of Jesus in Galilee and those in Jerusalem, whereas they are obviously different, and when he declares that the proclamation of Jesus will not find fertile soil among Jews, this is not thematic development in Mark.

The basic method for Matthew is redaction criticism, which emphasizes perspectives of the author rather than themes in the text, especially by noticing how Matthew alters his Markan source. Thus, Matthew wishes to emphasize the need of Jesus’ adherents to follow the Jewish law while opposing Jewish leaders of his day. Nevertheless, Ehrman does not neglect thematic development and presents an especially insightful account of the

Beatitudes as assurances to those who experience God's nearness—the kingdom of heaven anticipated in Matthew 4:17. Ehrman shows good sensitivity in not allowing that the declaration of some Jews at Jesus' trial, "his blood be on us and our children" (Matt. 27:25), could ever mean that Jews who were not present would be held responsible.

The basic method for Luke is comparison with Mark and Matthew without concern for who used whom as a source, a method that avoids critiques of interpreters who do not accept Markan priority. Two major differences are that (1) in combination with Acts, Luke is the first of a two-volume set, and (2) each volume begins with a formal prologue like Hellenistic histories. Ehrman follows a conventional historical judgment that most Jews did not accept Christianity, and against this background he claims that along with Acts, Luke's Gospel shows how salvation came to be largely rejected in Jerusalem. This does not adequately account for Acts 21:20. When Paul returns to Jerusalem, he is told how many tens of thousands of believers there are among the Jews. Ehrman gives a typical reading of Jesus' rejection in Nazareth in Luke 4 as a rejection by the people of Israel that warrants the passing of Jesus' message to the Gentiles. I fail to see how Nazareth stands for Israel, and the comparative method demonstrates strikingly that in comparison with Matthew and Mark, with one exception, Jesus does not leave Jewish territory and carries out no mission to Gentiles.

Acts comes in for a thematic method. Here Ehrman continues the theme of Jewish rejection of Christianity and the passing of Jesus' message to Gentiles. But aside from direct dealings with Gentiles in Lystra, Athens, and Ephesus, nowhere is there a mission in Acts directed solely to Gentiles. The author is much more on target when he describes Acts as accounting for how a Christian gospel that stands in continuity with Judaism ceased being addressed only to Jews.

All four methods used for the Synoptics and Acts in combination with the sociohistorical method form the strategy for reading John. From distinctive characterizations of Jesus, Ehrman determines three strata that reflect three sociological settings: in the synagogue, excluded from the synagogue, and against the synagogue. This is a complex issue, but I think this goes too far. It is largely based on the use of *aposunagēgos*, which is taken to mean an official exclusion from Judaism. The difficulty is that this adjective defies translation as "out of *the* synagogue," as if it refers to Judaism as such.

The predominant method for reading Epistles is to set them against their historical context. Though Ehrman uses the method for seven authentic Pauline Epistles, it holds also for the Johannine Epistles and pseudepigraphic

“forgeries” (Ehrman emphasizes motivations involving deception). In spite of Ehrman’s positive treatment of ancient Judaism, he interprets Ishmael in Galatians 4:21–30 as representing Jews who do not believe in Christ. Actually, the issue in this allegory is slavery and freedom rather than ethnicity. Both Jews and Gentiles can be slaves. Both Jews and Gentiles can be free. In the debate about whether Romans is written to deal with issues in the congregation like other Pauline Epistles or to give an account of Paul’s Gospel to attain support unlike other Pauline Epistles, *The New Testament* advocates the latter. To quibble, twice the author claims that in Romans 16 Paul greets twenty-eight people by name. I count only twenty-six. Rufus’s mother is unnamed, but she would make twenty-seven.

Ehrman makes Hebrews and Barnabas subheadings of a chapter on Christians and Jews. I find this enigmatic. Both documents are pertinent to the question, but they are hardly confined to this issue. How Christianity is related to Judaism is a subsidiary aspect of each document, hardly the other way around.

The format of *The New Testament* first appeared daunting to me—double columns on 7 ½" x 9 ¼" pages. But headings and subheadings break up the text. The book contains maps, timelines, charts, illustrations, and photographs—including a beautiful section of illuminated manuscripts—that keep interest sharp. Further, seldom do three pages appear without boxes that provide additional information. Two particular types of boxes introduce what readers should expect at the beginning of each chapter and recap the chapter at the end. Unfortunately, the boxes also lead to some redundancy (one gets Hanina ben Dosa and Honi the “circle drawer” multiple times). Redundancy is also a limitation in the main text (for example, Gnosticism is described twice).

A blurring of distinctions occurs in the discussion about the day of Jesus’ arrest and the time of the crucifixion when the Synoptic Gospels are compared with John. Whereas in the Synoptics, the last supper occurs on the 15th of Nisan, it is on the 14th in John. Ehrman repeatedly says that the *day* is different. The day is actually the same—Thursday evening. Rather, the *date* is different, and because the lunar calendar depended on the sighting of the new moon, we have ample evidence in Judaism for competing claims about dates for festivals such as Passover depending on who claimed to have seen the new moon. Further, because there were different conventions for telling time in antiquity, it is impossible to say that Jesus’ crucifixion at the third hour in Mark 15:25 is different from the sixth hour in John 19:14. From my point of view, Ehrman thus enhances his argument for the different *day* and *time* of the crucifixion of Jesus. Of

course this is a modern counterpart of his claim that those who developed Gospel traditions did the same, and thus an indirect confirmation of the likelihood that they too enhanced their arguments.

Lost Christianities repeats a lot that already appears in *The New Testament*, sometimes word for word, sometimes over a number of pages. Occasionally a footnote indicates a reference to the earlier work, at other times there is no acknowledgment. A number of photographs with identical captions appear in both books. Incidentally, the fact that the photograph of both sides of papyrus fragment P⁵² is printed backwards in *The New Testament* makes it more difficult to read the Greek. The reversal of the negative did not occur in the printing of duplicate material in *Lost Christianities*. But the printing without acknowledgment of the same material in two books, even if they are by the same author, is problematic. If this is not plagiarizing from oneself, at least readers who purchase both books might want to ask Oxford University Press for a partial refund.

On one level, the success of *The New Testament* speaks to its usefulness as a text for college and seminary classes. Nevertheless, I raise the question of the efficacy of a purely historical approach. Every time Ehrman gives evidence that the New Testament does not measure up to the criteria of modern historiography, he confirms the inadequacy of history alone as appropriate for introducing this literature. The literature is thoroughly infused with who God is and how God is related to humanity and the world, categories largely outside the canons of historiography. I simply find it impossible to introduce the New Testament to students merely from a historical perspective.

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BOOK REVIEWS

LaRue, Cleophus J., ed. *Power in the Pulpit: How America's Most Effective Black Preachers Prepare Their Sermons*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002. Pp. 191. \$22.95.

Cleophus LaRue has pursued an important and critical component of American religion and culture—African American preaching. LaRue is the Francis Landey Patton Associate Professor of Homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary and before that served as a pastor in Corpus Christi, Texas, a state known for its support of preaching by acknowledging and respecting the power in the pulpit. *Power in the Pulpit* shows how an array of popular African American preachers prepare their sermons. All of the preachers in this book are trained practitioners of the art and craft of preaching. This book is helpful to anyone who teaches or preaches because methodology is a critical element of the homiletic enterprise. While the preachers in this volume provide an excellent description of how they go about developing their sermons, they also provide the reader with an understanding of several types of sermons: dialectic, expository, narrative, correlational, and so forth.

There are several things I like about the book, beginning with the editor's helpful introduction. It highlights the black church's "unquenchable thirst for the preached word" and the correlation between black preaching and the "black worshiping community." He suggests that the dialogical nature of black preaching is inherent to the genre. In my view, this "thirst for the word" has its roots in slavery and the "brush harbor" church where slaves felt more kinship to the word if it came from one whose experiences were similar to their own. The slaves' desire to hear a black preacher superseded their desire to hear a sermon from the white plantation preachers because of the shared experiences of racism, injustice, and oppression. The slave preacher could connect the sermon to a mutually shared pain and longing for freedom.

All of the essays and sermons are enriching and exciting; however, I was particularly struck by the essays of Charles G. Adams, Charles E. Booth, H. B. Charles Jr., Prathia L. Hall, J. Alfred Smith, and Ralph D. West. For example, in Adams's essay "Preaching from the Heart and Mind," he preaches in every paragraph: "I believe that every sermon is dictated, directed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit or it is not a Sermon," or "If I must preach well, I must pray without ceasing. Only lively encounter with God can be the creative source of a new word from God." Prayer is also a critical element in his preparation vis-à-vis reading and studying what others have said about the chosen text.

Charles E. Booth gives us a clear and useful description of the dialectical method of sermon construction while acknowledging the contribution of Samuel DeWitt Proctor's adaptation of G. W. F. Hegel's dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Proctor was a master of using this method while augmenting it with his own narrative. Inasmuch as Charles Booth taught with Proctor, he is a master of the method in his own right. Incidentally, Booth does not generally take a manuscript to the pulpit; however, my recollection of Proctor was that he always preached from a full-length manuscript.

H. B. Charles's essay on how to expose and explain the text is a refreshing achievement for someone who admits "I hate writing sermons." His essay could have been strengthened by the thoughts of Paul Ricoeur, Hans Georg Gadamer, and James Cone, but what he has written is nicely done and maybe better without the complicated explanations of the aforesaid thinkers.

Prathia Hall has written one of the most incisive essays in the entire book. In "Encountering the Text" she says, "The preacher I most hear in my own voice is my father, although his was a totally male voice. This has nothing to do with gender but rather with the passion and pathos my father exhibited when he talked about suffering—the suffering of Jesus and of our people. The sound and style that I heard in my father now comes through me." In Hall's essay and sermon we get a sense of her reckoning with her own death, a real-life "Lesson Before Dying" or what I call a wrestling with "life to life."

In the final essay, "Weaving the Textual Web," Ralph West re-emphasizes the need for "textuality" on the part of the preacher vis-à-vis the need for planning and preparing sermons well in advance of preaching them. I find this to be more than commendable, given the myriad demands on the pastor.

Cleophus LaRue has edited a wonderful volume of essays and sermons that will benefit the novice as well as the experienced preacher. This book is full of nuggets that the preacher can mine to enrich his or her sermon development and delivery. I encourage anyone interested in the preaching task to absorb the wisdom found in these pages.

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Anthony, Michael J., and Warren S. Benson. *Exploring the History and Philosophy of Christian Education: Principles for the 21st Century*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003. Pp. 443. \$22.99.

Michael Anthony, professor of Christian Education and vice provost at the Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, and the late Warren Benson, professor of Christian Education and Leadership at the Southern Baptist

Theological Seminary have undertaken a very worthy project in this book. It is surely overdue in the field of Christian education. It is too bad that the results are not more worthy of praise.

The authors attempt to guide the reader through four thousand years of pedagogical highlights from Western civilization with an eye toward resourcing Christian education practitioners. They use a four-part format for each chapter: a schematic orientation to world historical context, an analysis of key themes and figures, some implications for the practice of educational ministry today, and a bibliography. They can be applauded for their commitment to dealing with educational ideas in historical context and for attempting to make historical and philosophical resources relevant to the practice of contemporary educational ministry. They are at their best when depicting conservative evangelical efforts in Christian education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Given their theological commitments, they present a surprisingly nuanced treatment of humanism in education and the contributions of Horace Bushnell to Christian education. The final chapter also provides some helpful rationale and guidelines for developing a personal philosophy of ministry.

Unfortunately, the shortcomings of the book far outweigh its merits. There are several historical inaccuracies and omissions in this book. For example, the early church catechumenate never produced a “standardized curriculum” that greatly influenced the Reformers; the catechumenate was a varied phenomenon that all but disappeared for a thousand years in Western Christianity. The discussion of Calvin’s contribution to the church’s educational ministry repeats tired old clichés about predestination and theological dictatorship; the significant and enduring contributions to the field of educational ministry by the Genevan reformer are hardly touched. Not all the leaders of the Enlightenment “sought to establish a worldview totally devoid of God”; thinkers like Rousseau and Kant sought to reframe belief in God in rational and moral terms. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were hardly efforts by the founding fathers to “establish a Christian order” in America; a goodly number of the founding fathers were committed Deists who had no use for the historic Christian faith as articulated by Nicaea and Chalcedon. There are also some glaring omissions. For example, it is simply beyond me how they could completely omit the role of Presbyterians in a discussion of denominational contributions to American education in the Middle Colonies. In the contemporary era the authors fail to make even passing reference to the significant contributions to the field of Christian education by figures like James E. Loder and James W. Fowler. Also, the bibliographic references provided at the end of each chapter tend to have a

high density of materials that are both dated and largely derivative from other conservative evangelical sources; there are very few references to primary sources. Finally, the authors' pervasive use of gender-exclusive language for human beings and frequent use of cutesy pietistic commentary make the book difficult to read and even harder to take seriously as an exercise in responsible scholarship in the field of Christian education.

To be sure, a project of this scope will always suffer from a certain amount of caricature and hermeneutical bias; this book has plenty of both. Of the three reasons given for why it is important to study the history and philosophy of Christian education—prophylaxis, armament, and intentionality—the first two gave this reader pause. Their phobia of spiritual infection caused by exposure to godless culture and their use of this study as a call to (evangelistic) arms leave the impression this project can only be justified as a defensive warding off of spiritual contamination or as a tool of evangelistic witness to lost souls. The tendentious theological judgments found at nearly every turn may well be satisfactory to intensely conservative evangelicals who opine for a perfectly flawless Bible and a spiritually pure church set over and against a fallen society with its supposedly valueless public school system. Astonishingly, the authors claim at any number of points to know exactly what God was doing in particular historical eras. One wonders how the authors have come to know the intimate details of divine activity in any given historical epoch with such blithe certainty. Christian educators who do not share their theological commitments may well find Anthony and Benson's views on history and contemporary cultural contexts of educational ministry problematic, if not downright offensive.

I really want to like this book. Unfortunately, with the exception of a few brief moments of insight, this book often reads rather like a collection of sanctimonious homilies on historical themes. It falls far short of its promise and left this reader hungry for more substantial fare. I would be hard pressed to recommend this book as a sound piece of scholarship in the history and philosophy of Christian education. I suppose that it would be fair to say that it could have been worse; but it should have been a whole lot better.

Gordon S. Mikoski
Princeton Theological Seminary

Morone, James A. *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. Pp. 575. \$35.00.

What has been the central dynamic of American political life? One interpretation stresses classical liberalism celebrating individuals' pursuit of their

own self-interest in the capitalist marketplace and sharply marks off the public from the private realm. An alternative reading emphasizes the communal impulse manifest as Americans join together whether in local communities or in a sense of mystic national harmony. While he finds valuable insight in each of these narratives, Brown University political scientist James Morone nevertheless believes that they miss a dimension both suffusing and rearranging these standard plot lines of American political life. He calls it the hellfire dimension: a moral and religious streak that has colored American life from the beginning. "When we go back and read about early America," Morone asserts, "we find early stirrings of liberal capitalism and plenty of emphasis on enduring community. But what leaps out, loudest and clearest, is the search for eternal salvation through Christ's grace. Morality mattered most in early America. It still matters—enormously—today."

Hellfire Nation offers a provocative and lively overview of American political history centered on this aspect. The book examines five major episodes in American life: (1) the Puritan origins of America's "morality politics," (2) the nineteenth century argument over slavery as viewed by white abolitionists, African Americans, and pro-slavery apologists, (3) Victorian struggles for purity in regard to alcohol, prohibition, and obscene materials in the U. S. mail, (4) the effort to apply what Morone calls a "social gospel" morality to American politics from the time of FDR in the 1930s through the 1960s of Martin Luther King, Jr., and (5) the current stress of the new religious right on resurrecting so-called traditional family values.

Throughout his survey, Morone sees a recurring dialectic that comes from America's Puritan roots. One side of the tradition underscores the importance of individual moral accountability, the other (most fully developed in the Protestant Social Gospel) underscores communal responsibility. The former, Morone seems to suggest, tends to explain social problems by looking for scapegoats—whether witches in the Salem of the 1690s, dangerous immigrant classes in the late nineteenth century, or the Communist fifth column feared by Senator Joseph McCarthy during the 1950s. By contrast, the Social Gospel tradition offers a more expansive vision of morality that seeks not to stigmatize an alien, unrighteous "them" versus the saintly "us" but rather attempts to include all in a vision of justice and redemption.

By telling the story of American politics in terms of morality and sin, Morone contributes fascinating insights that cut against the grain of conventional wisdom. For example, it is often assumed that American public life has moved from the religious to the secular. Yet events of the past generation do not bear out that assumption. The moral and theological rhetoric of both the civil rights movement and of today's new religious right makes American

politics appear to be more a story of intermittent revivals than secularization. Likewise, if one makes moral crusades the point of observation, the common notion that the federal government has expanded chiefly due to crises of depression and war needs reexamination. It was in peacetime during the 1870s that Congress authorized the policing of the mails to remove allegedly obscene materials and thereby expanded federal power dramatically. Similarly, the Eighteenth Amendment which sought to dry up all the alcohol in the land expanded federal authority well before the Great Depression and the threat of fascist dictators prompted FDR and the Congress to centralize greater power in Washington.

Any bold overview inevitably invites criticism from specialists and raises as many questions as it answers. *Hellfire Nation* is no exception. One wonders, for example, if Morone's story would be more nuanced if, as many colonial historians are now inclined, he paid as much attention to American origins in the Middle Colonies where established churches were weak and the Puritan impulse attenuated. Also, Morone does not develop the Social Gospel tradition with nearly the detail and vigor that he gives to the more individualistic, scapegoating aspect of American religion. Yet whatever reservations one may have about particular aspects of Morone's book, he has made a powerful case for the centrality of moral and religious themes in American political life. He also forces us to ask the painful question whether, on balance, that influence has been weighted more toward social pathology than health.

James H. Moorhead
Princeton Theological Seminary

Long, Edward LeRoy, Jr. *Facing Terrorism: Responding as Christians*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004. Pp. 117. \$12.95.

The author of this book is a veteran scholar in studies of peace and war, and a counselor to the Presbyterian Church (USA) in this field. The occasion of it is of course the specific terrorist act that happened on September 11, 2001, the al Qaeda movement that planned it, and the church task force that was formed to probe the issues it raised. But Long makes clear in his first chapter that terrorism is not new, nor can it be clearly separated from other forms of rebellion and war. Terrorists express the hatred against exploiting power that is shared by all revolutionaries. They attack non-combatants to spread fear, as the United States did when it dropped atomic bombs in World War II. They defy legitimate authority, like all rebels, in the name of the people they claim to represent. Like all who fight against great odds they reckon not only with their own resources, but with the victory of God. The underlying

problem is not terrorism in itself, but the "vortex of violence" into which our world is being drawn. How can this trend can be reversed and contained?

Long describes three basic methods. The first, which he calls the crusade model, uses violence to stamp out violence. The division between good and evil is absolute. There is no negotiation or compromise. Military action uses war to establish order and peace. This seems to be the model of the United States government at the moment. But the enemy is not a government, but a force with many centers, a movement united only in regarding us as evil. There is no end to such a war.

The second method is law enforcement. It has a long history which Long traces, going back at least to the League of Nations. Its principle is police action, though it may at times use military force in a limited war, as was the case in Korea five decades ago, or may fight for its very life as in World War II. It depends on a structure of international law and institutions that legitimates and governs every nation's action. Like all law enforcement, this model assumes that the problem will always be there. Its objective is to contain and minimize terrorism, to bring its perpetrators to justice.

There are problems with this model, too. Its institutions are new and the United States, especially, has not given them full support. Enforcement agencies have not been adequately authorized and financed. The questions how far civil liberties may be abridged for the sake of security, when and how far military action is justified, and how decision makers are chosen and controlled, remain. The use of violence in this context may be necessary but it is always questionable. "Agonized participation" is Long's phrase for the war against Hitler and Japan, and for much recent use of violence even in the service of international law.

The third model Long offers is peacemaking. This is not appeasement. It aims to transform the parties to a conflict by human contact, by establishing common interests amid diversity of faiths, convictions, cultures, and power centers. Its aim is new ways of living together in order, peace, and reconciliation. Long sees this model at work in the Carter Center, in the U.S. Institute of Peace, and in some United Nations work, but basically he commends it to Christians as their ministry. It depends on faith, humility, and servanthood in the use of power. It involves admission of fault, repentance and forgiveness, even when these are not reciprocated. It is a witness to the gospel.

There are problems with this model as well. Violent action can undermine it, whether from the dominant power or from the resisters, as the example of Israel and Palestine shows. It depends on new relationships between old enemies being institutionalized in enforced structures of justice and law,

which leads to questions about the ability of the United Nations to take on this role. It raises the question of the faith undergirding the process. Are there ultimate reasons—among Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and others, as well as among Christians—for believing in it? What is the relation between evangelism, by whatever faith, and peacemaking?

These questions go beyond the book. But for any group that cares about the problems of terrorism, Long lays a foundation in this brief but substantive volume for pursuing them.

Charles C. West
Princeton Theological Seminary

McKim, Donald K. *Presbyterian Beliefs: A Brief Introduction*. Louisville: Geneva Press, 2003. Pp. 126. \$12.95.

McKim, Donald K. *Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers: Exploring Christian Faith*. Louisville: Geneva Press, 2003. Pp. 113. \$12.95.

If I was facing ordination exams in the PC(USA) and had only two days to study, I would give a thorough reading to Donald K. McKim's two recent books: *Presbyterian Beliefs: A Brief Introduction* and *Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers*. (Note, I am not encouraging such limited study!) In *Presbyterian Beliefs* McKim brings his years of experience as a pastor, academician, writer, and editor to the task of creating a basic primer for Presbyterians. His outline is simple and straightforward with three major sections, The God Who Reveals, Creates, and Guides; The Christ Who Saves People Like Us; and The Church, Where Faith Begins, Is Nourished, and Grows.

In *Presbyterian Questions* McKim takes most of the same themes treated in the first book, such as Jesus Christ, Humanity, Church, Salvation, a total of thirteen themes, and expands on all the topics save one with seven questions and answers. The chapter on the Bible has eight questions and answers. For instance under worship his seven questions are: Why should we worship? Why does the prayer of confession list sins I never committed? Why don't Presbyterian churches have altars? Why don't Presbyterian churches have altar calls? What is preaching and why is it important? Why do Presbyterians insist sacraments be celebrated only in worship services? What is the relation between worship and the rest of life?

Of course these issues do not only appear on ordination exams. Sometimes they come up at the dinner table, when Aunt Edith wonders why her Presbyterian pastor would not baptize her grandson at her house when her daughter was visiting. Presbyterian pastors would be wise to put a copy of

Presbyterian Beliefs in the hands of their session members and use both books with new member classes. I would have welcomed a look at some of the struggles in the Presbyterian Church and some of the weaknesses or challenges presented by Presbyterian answers or the lack thereof. Perhaps these are issues for a book. I suggest the McKim and Geneva Press look into doing one.

Dean Foose
Princeton Theological Seminary

McKim, Donald K., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. 320. \$60.00 hardback, \$22.00 paperback.

Eighteen essays by scholars on a variety of themes relating to the life, work, historical legacy, and contemporary relevance of Martin Luther fulfill the goal of the *Cambridge Companion* series to "provide an accessible and stimulating introduction to the subject for new readers and non-specialists." The collection provides an overview of the many different perspectives that meet in the study of Luther today. Competent treatments of Luther's life and context in the town of Wittenberg (Beutel, Junghans) are followed by essays that introduce his writings via various editions available in English (Lull), his work as translator and interpreter of scripture (Gritsch, Bayer), his theology and moral theology (Wriedt, Wannenwetsch), his work as a preacher and polemicist (Meuser, Edwards), his spiritual journey (Strohl), and his contributions to social-ethical issues and contemporary politics (Lindberg, Whitford). In a third section, essays treat Luther's influence on the next generation of Lutherans (Kolb) and on subsequent generations of European culture (Hillerbrand), as well as how the reformer can be approached by readers today (Nestingen). A final section offers evaluations of Luther's impact on modern church history (Kittelson), his contemporary theological significance (Jenson), and his reception in the ecumenical environment of worldwide Christianity today (Gassmann).

Space allows only a brief comment on some particularly helpful essays. Oswald Bayer offers a compelling view of Luther's interpretation of the Bible in terms of the reformer's insight that God's Word is not mere sign but creative reality that effects what it says. Herein is a view of God and creation that says a great deal to a modern world that seems determined to live without God. Bayer offers modern readers a challenge: "Whoever shuts himself off to the reliable word, the promise, loses the world as a home and trades it in as a wasteland."

Bernd Wannenwetsch effectively trumps an old intra-Protestant debate

about the law by revealing a positive expression of the law's message in Luther's moral theology. The law-gospel antinomy is "not meant to function as an all-encompassing category," for the ultimate meaning of the law for Luther is worship, as shown in his comments on God's command concerning the tree of knowledge as the "foundation of the church" (WA 42:79). In this understanding, faith and love function together but in a way opposite the scholastic formula that faith needs to be formed by love; it is, rather, love which needs to be formed by faith.

While there are no poor essays in the volume, there are certain weaknesses in this type of collection. Chief is that of coherence: as a whole the volume serves as a helpful tool for exploring the riches of Luther's life and work, but there is no coherent interpretation offered. Some of the essayists cling to the old saw that since Luther himself offered no systematic overview of his theology, therefore such coherence lies beyond the capability of scholarship, if indeed it existed in the reformer's thought. But the volume itself shows that lack of coherence in Luther is often the result of the methods or agendas used in approaching him. Is *theosis* or deification in Luther's thought the result of an ecumenical agenda based "at least in part on the barest shreds of material evidence regarding the presence of Christ in the justified" (Kittelson)? Or is it a reality in Luther based on "overwhelming evidence" (Jenson)? Do confessional churches identifying themselves with Luther's teaching in fact have no right to exist "according to their founder's own Reformation approach" (Wriedt)? Or is the public act of confessing the enactment of Luther's concept of the Word of God that defines the church "as an institution governed by its doctrinal pronouncements" (Kolb)?

Numerous similar (and substantive) contradictions in interpretation are present in this volume. The result is that these essays may serve as helpful guides into the enigmatic world of Luther research, but that new students of Luther's thought will probably find themselves lost in the maze created by Luther's interpreters.

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Bayer, Oswald. *Martin Luthers Theologie: Eine Vergegenwärtigung*. Tübingen: Mohr, 2003. Pp. 354. €29.00 (approx. \$35.00).

Oswald Bayer's latest book originates in a series of public lectures at the University of Tübingen, where he has taught Systematic Theology for twenty-five years, and offers the fruits of a lifelong engagement. It also serves as an introduction to Luther's theology for people without academic back-

ground in theology and often draws on earlier writings by the author, including material that has been translated into English.

The book relies on a rich variety of sources, especially those intended for a popular audience, like the Small and the Large Catechism, prefaces to biblical commentaries, hymns, and sermons. Its goal is a reimagining of Luther's theology and its validity for today. The point of contact is the existential plight of the believer then and now. For Bayer, the questions of Luther's times are the same as ours.

The material is arranged according to theological topics. In the first part ("Prolegomena"), Bayer treats four issues: the definition and the main theme of theology, the definition of "evangelical," and the concept of Holy Scripture. The second part ("Material Dogmatics and Ethics") discusses twelve topics: creation, the orders of creation (church, state, and economy), anthropology, sin, God's wrath and evil, christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, faith and good works, the two regiments, eschatology and the trinity, petitionary prayer. A preface and an introduction complement the book.

Bayer locates Luther's theology within the late medieval context. Its purpose is to sharpen and to console the believer's conscience in view of the Last Judgment. He indicates three central perspectives: the call to freedom, the distinction between Law and Gospel, and justification by faith alone. On the whole, he argues, Luther's theology gains consistency from its reference to the dynamic of God's *promissio*, which is actualized—not merely represented—in the words of institution ("this is Christ's body and blood given for you") and absolution ("your sins are forgiven").

Throughout the book, Bayer emphasizes the apocalyptic dualism that shaped Luther's theology. Christianity, he says, knows of the "horrifying possibility" of a final annihilation, which means eternal death and separation, or "evil absolute." The situation of *Anfechtung* arises, when the whole world, including one's own self, becomes a hostile environment and God appears as someone who has broken His word. The only escape from this hidden God is the flight to the God who has revealed beyond doubt, "through the Son in the Holy Spirit," the goodness of His creation and who grants certitude of salvation. Bayer thus distinguishes between a "general" doctrine of God, which deals with the "absolute God" who is experienced as an "enemy," and a doctrine of the trinitarian God who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ. He also offers a quote, in which Luther insists that God *never* deals with human beings apart from the word of promise, wherefore we can *never* deal with God apart from our faith in this word. Is God's judgment *always* a gracious judgment, as Karl Barth insisted, or does such a conclusion dispose of the reality of evil, as Bayer holds against Barth? Although God's *promissio* is real,

the “overturning” in God, which resolves the deadly confrontation between the human being who sins and the God who justifies, seems to remain incomplete until the “final victory of grace,” when the “original” world that lives according to God’s will is restored.

Problems recur when the distinction between a “general” and a trinitarian doctrine of God is projected onto the distinction between Law and Gospel and a “general” anthropology comes into view. The Law then deals with the “non-Christian human being” who stands under God’s “demand and accusation” and functions apart from the Gospel. Is the claim that the Law is prior in fact, whereas the Gospel always remains prior in principle, sufficient to prevent their separation? For Luther, the Law leads to humility or even despair, but it is not designed to deceive the sinner about his or her inability to love God, as some of his followers thought. I also wonder whether he would agree that sin constitutes the human being as an individual person, especially since Bayer himself states that subjectivity means being made alive by God’s Spirit and endowed with *Sprachvernunft* and that the Gospel should not be understood only as the negation of sin.

Bayer criticizes the view of the state as a means of coercion as too narrow and points to later texts from Luther that envision the state as a tool of human sociability. He also emphasizes the reformer’s high esteem for public law and correlates it with the fear of “complete chaos” in the face of the peasants’ revolt. Unfortunately, he takes Luther’s view of the inability of the people to govern themselves at face value and does not ask further for the roots of popular resentment, although he mentions a lack of democratic structures as one possible reason. Finally, he believes that the modern state and its loyal Christian citizens stand under a “divine commission to resist evil” by caring for justice and peace. Yet, the cited military actions are dubious examples at best, since they had the opposite effect, especially in Kosovo but also in Afghanistan. (Iraq is not mentioned.) The assessment of Luther’s political ethics thus remains disputed.

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Wittenberg, Germany

Das, A. Andrew. *Paul and the Jews*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003. Pp. 238. \$24.95.

In this well-written and thoughtful analysis of the now perennial subject of Paul and the Jews, Andrew Das (Professor of Theology and Religion at

Elmhurst College) seeks to build on the so-called “new perspective” on Paul and to offer a few correctives along the way. In my view he does both successfully. Das takes on the ever daunting task of trying to make coherent sense of what Paul says about the Jews, the Jewish law, the relationship between Christian Gentiles and non-Christian Jews, the significance of Israel’s election, and how all of this relates to Paul’s convictions about the coming of Jesus as the messiah. In the process Das does an admirable job of contextualizing Paul in the first-century Jewish world, and of offering close exegetical readings of Romans and Galatians in particular, where the issues Das addresses are most pressing for Paul and hence for Christians who stand as heirs to the Pauline traditions.

Das begins by rehearsing the “new perspective” on Paul, launched especially by E. P. Sanders’s landmark *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977) and developed in the many writings of James D. G. Dunn. Having surveyed this new starting point in Pauline studies, Das takes a detailed look at the crisis in Galatia and the situation in Rome that elicited Paul’s letters to these early Christian communities. In Galatians, Paul is struggling with law-observant Jewish-Christian opponents. While this is nothing really new, still Das provides a thorough exegetical discussion of Paul’s argument, particularly in light of his apocalyptic convictions. For Paul, any insistence on Gentile law-observance obscures the guidance of Christ’s indwelling Spirit. Everything has changed in light of the Christ-event, and this includes Paul’s evaluation of the Jewish Law and the identity of Israel. Faith in Christ becomes the new boundary marker of God’s people, not law-observance.

As for Romans, Das focuses on the issue of the “strong” and the “weak” in Romans 14–15. The “weak” are those who observe Jewish customs, though Paul advocates that such observance should be tolerated and respected, if not encouraged. In Romans 9–11 Paul tries to explain how God’s elect people did not benefit from their election, as they failed in large measure to recognize their own messiah. But even this rejection of Israel’s messiah fit into the plans of God’s divine election, extending God’s election from Jews to Gentiles in Christ. Das makes a strong case against the notion of a “two covenant” approach in Paul—one covenant via the Mosaic Law for the Jews and another covenant via Jesus as the messiah for the Gentiles. The coming of the messiah has resulted in the hardening of the hearts of some in Israel, but Paul remains confident that “all Israel” will be saved eventually. The ethnic identity of Jews is not the basis for salvation, as Das reads Paul, rather faith in Christ is the common basis for salvation of Jew and Gentile alike. Paul affirms both the election of Israel (Rom. 11) and the necessity of faith in Christ.

One of the more intriguing arguments that Das offers has to do with the image in Romans 11 of the branches that have been broken off the olive tree. Das opposes an “extreme displacement” reading of this image. Instead, he argues that “far from being permanently displaced, the natural branches will eventually be restored.” This is what Paul means by saying that Israel has not stumbled so as to fall (Rom. 11:11). Das also offers a helpful reading of the difficult passage from 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16, seeing it as genuinely Pauline, but also reading it within the context of ancient polemical hyperbole within an eschatological context. Although Israel experiences God’s eschatological wrath apart from Christ, nevertheless Paul remains confident that the salvation of all Israel is an eschatological certainty. Just as the Law was a temporary measure (Gal. 3), so is Israel’s hardening (Rom. 9–11).

In a thorough discussion of “the curse of the Mosaic Law,” Das provides a useful discussion of what Paul finds wrong about the Law. He focuses first on the tension between Galatians 3:10 (anyone who tries to do what the Law requires falls under its curse) and Philippians 3:6 (where Paul labels his own law-observance as “blameless”). While it was commonly thought in early Judaism that both Abraham and Moses kept the whole of the Law perfectly, and Jews admonished each other to perfection (not unlike Jesus in Matthew 7), Paul’s self-report of being “blameless” should be distinguished from perfect obedience. “Whereas perfect obedience was unerring success in doing all that God commanded in the Law, blamelessness included the broader context of the Law: God’s election and mercy upon the people.”

Finally, Das develops the notion of the Law as “an enslaving power. He argues that “the Law thus appears to be a negative, enslaving power from which one must be liberated.” In my view this is an unfortunate way of describing the situation. Is it really the Law from which one needs liberation, or is it the power of sin that has misused the Law to enslave? Das seems to recognize this tension (“the virus of Sin has simply commandeered the Law and its commandment”), but still refers to the “power” of the Law to enslave. Perhaps this is a minor point, but it seems to me important to be careful about denigrating the Law *per se*, as opposed to criticizing the way the Law has been misused. Indeed, Das can also present the positive ways in which the “Spirit takes hold of the law.”

In sum, then, Das is to be commended for letting Paul be Paul. Paul’s approach to the Jews, the Law, election, and all the rest can really only be understood from Paul’s christocentric understanding and experience. As Das concludes, Paul “adopted the aberrant position that ethnic Israel would not benefit from God’s election or promises apart from faith in Jesus Christ.”

And yet, any Christian “dare not proceed beyond faith in Christ to a presumptuous dismissal of ethnic Israel’s place in God’s plan.”

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Gunton, Colin. *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. Pp. 162. \$29.99.

Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes is a straightforward rethinking of the divine attributes according to God’s trinitarian activity in human history. The book operates on two levels that are never clearly distinguished: a critical narration of the theological tradition’s treatment of the divine attributes and Colin Gunton’s own programmatic proposal. Gunton’s narrative reveals how traditional reflection on the attributes has been tangled between the webs of Hebraic and Hellenic thought. The consequences have been a “sub-Christian doctrine of God” that is overburdened with philosophical concepts and insufficiently biblical and trinitarian. “Predominance of the negative” is how Gunton characterizes the root problem. This means theologians have been more concerned to make clear what God is *not*, rather than reflect upon what God *is*. Instead of beginning with attributes such as holiness and love—as revealed in the economy of salvation—theologians have instead started with abstract attributes such as simplicity, impassibility, or oneness, which are originally rooted in Greek thought. This subordination of the economic attributes to the abstract ones has effectively muted the economic attributes.

According to Gunton this preoccupation with negation finds its apotheosis in the early medieval theologian Pseudo-Dionysius. The negative theology of Dionysius was transmitted at large to the tradition through Thomas Aquinas’s appropriation of him for fashioning the influential doctrine of analogy. This Hellenic inheritance is characterized by a preference for abstract and cosmological language, which meant theologians under its influence were sheepish when confronted with the historical and trinitarian language of the Bible. Gunton believes this tendency is the source of one of the great sins of the theological tradition: the displacement of the Old Testament by Greek philosophy. He neatly captures his critical and constructive advance when he says, “Greeks appear to stress a theology of divine being, Hebrews of divine action.”

In the chapter “From Scripture to Scotus” Gunton points the way out of

the thicket of negative theology. First, he appeals to the historical character of God as revealed in biblical narrative; second, he employs the philosophical critique of the doctrine of analogy by another medieval theologian, Duns Scotus. Working from Scotus's doctrine of univocity, Gunton believes that we can make real theological claims about the attributes simply based upon God's revelation in salvation history.

Beginning with the doctrine of the trinity, Gunton seeks to establish a "narrative definition" of the attributes. Following Barth's lead he maintains that there can be no breach between God's being (*in se*) and God's actions for us in salvation history. "God is what he does and does what he is." We ought to allow holiness, justice, mercy, and love—all attributes revealed in the trinitarian economy and exemplified in different ways in each of the persons—to be the starting points for theological reflection. At this point it would be easy to assume Gunton simply rejects the philosophically inspired attributes; rather, Gunton reverses the order of their treatment and allows the emphasis to fall on the economically derived attributes: the communicable attributes (love, holiness, mercy) condition the incommunicable (omnipotence, simplicity, infinity). Gunton recognizes the theological wisdom behind attributes such as simplicity and impassibility; these secure the integrity of the economic attributes.

Unfortunately, when one looks for sustained, constructive reflection upon even one of the economic attributes she will be disappointed. Gunton never manages to move far from his critical narrative and sophisticated theological posturing, which makes this work more programmatic than constructive. Gunton makes some profound preliminary observations on the attributes (e.g., holiness and spirit), but he never draws them into focus. This is not necessarily a weakness of the book (he made no promises), but it suggests that a great deal more work would need to be done in order for his program to be fully persuasive.

The theological narrative Gunton tells is controversial. Not many theologians would accept Duns Scotus as the last word on the doctrine of analogy. Nor ought we to accept Gunton's simplistic distinctions between Greek and Hebrew thought. This critical narrative is not original to Gunton, but builds on a distinctly modern theological project begun in the nineteenth century—which means his proposal cannot be construed as a philosophically unprejudiced recovery of the "biblical" attributes. Ultimately, however, *Act and Being* is a success. It is a rare event that one finds a book amidst the landscape of contemporary theology that treats the doctrine of God with such urgency, seriousness, depth. The great legacy of Colin Gunton is reminding us that

the true orbit of Christian theology revolves around human grappling with God.

Christopher Ganski
New Haven, Connecticut

Webb, Stephen H. *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004. Pg. 244. \$24.99.

The biblical faith of Christians is rooted in the claim that God has a voice and that “the divine voice has a body in Jesus Christ.” Stephen Webb makes that assertion on page 36, and for another 203 pages of text he strikes up conversations with theologians, philosophers, rhetoricians, homiletics, performance-studies scholars, voice specialists, literary and aesthetic theorists, ethicists, historians, and others in an effort to get his readers to believe it. All the conversations are stimulating, and one comes away from them with fascinating insights aplenty to ponder, to agree with, or to question.

The heart of the book is to be found in the final four chapters, chapters 6 through 9. In chapter 6 Webb pairs Erasmus with Tracy, Luther with Niebuhr, Calvin with Hauerwas, including an appreciative critique of the thought of each so bringing theological perspectives of the reformation era and the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to bear upon what Webb calls “acoustemology,” systematic reflection on how Christians know what they know in worship.

Chapter 7, titled “The Sound of God,” is Webb’s citation of Barth’s contribution to Webb’s project in acoustemology. Webb speaks of Barth as “the premier theologian-actor of the modern age” who with “radically dogmatic rhetoric” sought to return Protestantism to “its foundations in the drama of the spoken Word.” Webb finds Barth to be arguing for naturalness, honesty and directness in preaching. But these qualities must be developed for they are not instinctual and habitual. Each preacher’s voice is meant to be an echo of the divine voice which may be heard in scripture. The Word scripture attests is “a particular person, not a general principle,” and this person, whose history is in fact the history of God, speaks a personal word to persons in context. Preachers therefore should do the same. Further, the sermon is a radically occasional genre, so there can be no general rule to govern sermon composition. God’s voice is free but not unpredictable, for it can be identified as the voice of Jesus Christ.

In chapter 8, “Reading, Hearing, Acting: Toward a Christian Acoustemology,” Webb asks his readers to think about the Bible as an oral document. Reading should be slow and, when at all possible, should be done aloud. A

sense of the author's voice and presence should be sought and, along with that voice, the voice of God. For Webb even silent reading done aright is a kind of embodied performance of the Word, covert perhaps, but nevertheless audible to the inner ear of the imagination. The Word is visible to the inner eye too and even capable of being touched as words spoken and heard may be said to touch people deeply. Scripture thus spoken and heard in worship might obviate the need for the theatrics customary in some "seeker services." Such speaking and hearing of scripture, along with the Christ-embodied voice of God in preaching, also suggests that there may be no need to turn to power-point sermons or other video-assisted proclamations since, instead of enhancing the oral-aural, face-to-face eventfulness of preaching they may in fact impede it.

In chapter 9, "The Lasting Word," Webb brings to the surface what all along is there to be felt as subtext for his work, namely that sound has a synesthetic destiny, that it implicates, enlivens, and transforms the operations of all the senses. This synesthetic destiny is grounded in the soundfulness of triune, divine life and is central to what lasting fellowship with that divine life entails. For sound and speech arise not out of silence but out of the vocality of the Eternal One whose Word is everlastingly an embodied Word. In fact divine silence itself arises from and is pregnant with the sound of the life that is life indeed, just as rests in music are in their own way audible and pregnant with what has come before and with what is aborning. In the reformation, Webb notes, sermons not only were heard but also felt, tasted and seen, all because of the synesthesia of the ear that is the gift of the Spirit. As breath carries the human voice, so the Spirit carries the voice of God, and human voices are truest to their nature when they echo the divine voice. So is heaven resonant with divine/human vocality.

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Moltmann, Jürgen. *In the End—the Beginning: The Life of Hope*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004. Pp. 180. \$17.00.

Eschatology has been at the core of Jürgen Moltmann's theological project since the publication of *Theologie der Hoffnung* in 1965 (ET 1967). In that volume, he refashioned the question of the "last things" in light of God's promissory history with humanity. Eschatology, he argued, should be understood as the comprehensive doctrine of Christian hope, which permeates every dimension of Christian doctrine. *In the End—the Beginning*, which

Moltmann calls a "little doctrine of hope," is a concise meditation of some of these same issues.

"The last is not the end but the new beginning," states Moltmann. As such, eschatology should begin, not with a consideration of the end of life, but with its beginnings. Thus Moltmann opens with a consideration of the theological dimensions of childhood and youth. Childhood, Moltmann argues, is a time of open possibility and expectation for the future. Both through his incarnation and in his teaching, Christ transforms and elevates the status of the child as one in whom God dwells: "Just as God is in Christ by virtue of Christ's messianic mission, so Christ is present in every child. Anyone who 'receives' a child receives God."

This elevation of the child, however, should not be confused with the modern cult of the young. Youth is no protection against the depredations of modern society. The future does not belong to the young, but rather, according to Moltmann, the future "makes us young." The life of hope is to be lived in the midst of these new beginnings, even in the face of catastrophe and injustice.

In what is perhaps the most intriguing portion of the book, Moltmann attempts a refashioning of the doctrine of justification. He argues that justification should not be understood primarily in terms of the forgiveness of sins, but must take into account the suffering of the victims of injustice. Justification then has a two-fold meaning. For the perpetrator of evil, justification is found in pardon. But this pardon cannot take place unless there is a parallel justification that sets right the wrong done to the victims. Justification then is not about justifying the unjust, but about *transforming* injustice and *bringing about* conditions of justice.

In the final section of the book, Moltmann turns to the classic eschatological questions of death, hell, and eternal life. Rather than *what* awaits us after death, Moltmann argues that we should more properly ask *who* awaits us. Death need not be feared, he argues, if we recognize that the one who awaits us beyond death is the one who became incarnate, suffered, and died on our behalf. A basic trust in the love of God ought to comfort us in the face of our own deaths and the deaths of those we love.

This idea is particularly pronounced when he considers the question of hell. Arguing that the traditional image of hell is that of the "religious torture chamber," Moltmann insists that Christian faith ought to affirm the divine love that will storm the gates of hell on behalf of the damned. "All its gates are open. Hell is no longer inescapable, and in hell no one must 'abandon hope,' . . . If there were still any lost in hell, it would be a tragedy for Christ, who came 'to seek that which is lost.' "

Moltmann's Reformed roots are apparent in his emphasis on God's sovereignty and the triumph of grace over human self-regard and intransigence. Salvation is more than simply the salvation of human beings, or even of society. Rather, the fates of individuals, communities, and the whole cosmos are bound up together, and no element of what God has created will be finally lost. "In the restoration of all things, everything that happened in sequence in the progress of time will be present in the eternal moment. It is only then that what God promises in Rev. 21.5 can come to fulfillment: 'Behold I make *all things new.*' "

Moltmann's books tend to alternate between large volumes of academic theology and briefer, more popular treatments of the same subjects. *In the End—the Beginning* is of the latter sort. It treats some of the same themes discussed in Moltmann's *The Spirit of Life* and *The Coming of God*, but in a more accessible and engaging manner. There are also some new twists on standard Moltmannian themes. As usual, Moltmann displays the strengths and weaknesses of a creative and fertile theological imagination. He is willing to take risks with ideas. The risks don't always pay off, but in asking Moltmann's questions and considering his answers, we are brought to a deeper consideration of the issues he addresses.

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Via, Dan O., and Robert A. J. Gagnon. *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. Pp. 117. \$13.00.

Dan Via (Duke Divinity School) and Robert Gagnon (Pittsburgh Theological Seminary) come down on different sides of the homosexuality debate. Here both biblical scholars make a substantial presentation and then a shorter response to the main points of the other. In "The Bible, the Church, and Homosexuality," Via argues traditional approaches to the subject, Gagnon included, view homosexual *actions* as inherently sinful, regardless of the context and quality of the relationship of the individuals involved. In contrast, Via argues the morality of homosexual actions depends on their context and quality. To get to this point, and past a lot of tradition in the process, Via draws upon what "recent social science has taught us" and upon "the contemporary experience of gay and lesbian Christians." These things, when brought to bear upon the theological and ethical conflicts or differences within scripture, give Via a "biblical theology" that prefers Paul and the Gospels over Leviticus and allows him to adopt a more open and accepting

approach to homosexuality in cases of “consensual, committed, loving relationships.”

In “The Bible and Homosexual Practices: Key Issues,” Gagnon provides a dense summary of his 520-page *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, with notes keyed to an extensive discussion of Via’s position on his website (www.robgagnon.net). Having argued against the myth of the “sexually tolerant Jesus,” Gagnon surveys the Bible and concludes that the male-female prerequisite for acceptable sexual intercourse with its attendant prohibition to all same-sex intercourse constitutes a “core value” of scripture, i.e., a value held pervasively, absolutely, strongly, and counterculturally. Gagnon does not rule out an examination of modern contextual factors, but he insists that an extraordinary burden of proof remains with those who would revoke a core value of scripture. They need to show there is new information that was unavailable to the biblical writers *and* that this information speaks directly to the reasons why the biblical writers held to their views. After rejecting the analogies commonly put forth for embracing homosexual practice in the church—the Gentile inclusion in the church, slavery, women’s roles, divorce and remarriage—Gagnon concludes that Via failed to meet the burden of proof on both points. Gagnon also deals with the social science literature but comes to different conclusions than Via.

In his response, Via admits to a substantial agreement with Gagnon that the biblical texts which “deal specifically with homosexual practice condemn it unconditionally.” In spite of his agreement, Via contends Gagnon brings two questionable presuppositions to his argument. The first is that no contextual factors can ever override a core value of scripture. Via contends such core values can and should be overridden if there are *good* reasons, including the very sorts of contextual factors he says Gagnon excludes at the outset. The second is an anachronistic concept that “anatomical complementarity” carries weight in biblical arguments about same-sex practices. In response, Gagnon argues that Via underestimates the extent and degree of scripture’s opposition to homosexual practice and that this opposition cannot relegate homosexual practice to an outdated purity rule. Further Gagnon contends Via’s theology of sexuality ignores positive biblical support for a sexual congruence and complementarity between males and females. With his presuppositions, Gagnon says Via has no reason to exclude polygamists, pederasts, and incestuous partners as long as they are in “consensual, committed, loving relationships.” Gagnon also argues that there were many theories about homoerotic behavior in the ancient Greco-Roman world that used “anatomical complementarity.” Even the modern notion of “orientation” is

compatible with Paul's understanding of sin as congenital, controlling, and physical.

Does God care about hearts alone (Via) or hearts *and* biology (Gagnon)? Does love and commitment trump all "structural prerequisites for sexual intimacy"? At points, Via seems to say "yes," while Gagnon says "no." This difference seems to create a fissure through any common ground these authors may share. Even the gospel itself seems to have two different meanings. For Via, God wants individuals, heterosexual and homosexual alike, to realize all of the possibilities of good *in* their created destiny. Gagnon, in contrast, believes that God offers individuals, heterosexual and homosexual alike, the possibility of redemption *from* their created and acquired destiny.

Homosexuality and the Bible does a fine job of bringing into focus the exegetical and hermeneutical issues facing mainline churches. I wish the publisher had conducted the exchange as a formal debate with a moderator who required the authors to speak to each others' points more directly. (It turns out that Gagnon did respond to Via's second round of concerns in great detail on his website.) It may be too strong to say that Gagnon *owns* the biblical and ancient historical interpretation on the subject, but I know of no one who has stepped forward and gone head to head with him on this material, point by point, down the line. The success of *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* is that it summarizes two thoughtful and pastorally sensitive approaches to an extremely complex and divisive subject. Yet while the issue is complex, the book shows there are still only two basic perspectives—Via's or Gagnon's or variations of one or the other. This reinforces what logic and history seem to show, namely that there is no compromise or middle way through the current impasse in the mainline churches that does not or will not eventually overturn existing ordination standards in favor of the "more open and accepting approach." There are difficult days ahead for the mainline churches. For readers who have largely skimmed the surface of the debate thus far, this book is a good place to go deeper.

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